

EDITORIAL

Humility and the environment

I have had the odd reminder here and there, but most of the time it seems forgotten that the only rationale for this ecologically-arbitrary point in time being referred to as 'The Millennium' lies in the birth of a single human being in the Middle East some two thousand years ago. This millennium is thus certainly a useful point in time at which to take stock of what we humans have done in the last two thousand years and it is therefore not inappropriate to consider what we hope for half that period of time into the future, namely the next thousand. Thinking across such a timescale is far beyond what we normally do, and the process offers a healthy perspective on the whole field of conserving the environment.

To me, many features stand out strongly in that life of two thousand years ago, but one of the most prominent is humility. Christians believe that Christ lived in it, constantly taught it (e.g. Holy Bible, Philippians 2: 6–7), and that ultimately he gave away his life as an embodiment of it. Humility is surely therefore a worthy candidate on this basis for any environmental message for the third millennium, but what might it mean environmentally? Is it conceivable that the next thousand years, in spite of their initiation in an unprecedented flurry of excessive human excitement and consumption, against a 500-year history of growing aspirations, but following a century of unprecedented destruction of human and non-human life, could nevertheless prove to be an era of human self-restraint? Let us consider the broad options.

Simplistically and on a grand scale, there are two hypotheses in a sense contending for the future of humans and the Earth. On the one hand, many 'environmentalists' state that the human carrying capacity of the biosphere is constrained by natural factors and processes, that although we cannot accurately predict the boundaries of those constraints, they are probably increasing as human development proceeds, and *Homo sapiens* should proceed, if at all further, only with the greatest caution. On the other hand, many 'humanists' argue that human mechanisms such as 'the market' and 'science' will always find the means to progress, and the species can, and must, move forward. In a positive humanist spirit, it is easy to accept that many civilizations have succeeded against what will have appeared at times to be 'all odds' in remarkable ways, human population growth being one, even if ultimately and individually they have failed. So why now be deterred by the perceived environmental limits of the Earth? Science cannot specifically prove that the precautionary approaches that environmentalists promote are the more appropriate at this moment in time; in fact, it cannot rule out any of a vast range of reasonable future outcomes.

But two points must surely stand out boldly. On the one hand, 'the market' has yet to quantify, let alone account for, most of the costs on which its promise of future benefits to humankind are predicated. That is scarcely reassuring for a strategy upon which to build a secure future for *Homo sapiens* on Earth. Secondly, and in contrast, restraint in the face of the uncertainty would seem to offer a more sustainable basis for human aspirations. The Bible does offer to Christians its own notions of human stewardship, particularly in the form of humility to a higher order beyond the self (e.g. Holy Bible, Romans 1: 20–22), although the extent to which a modern environmental 'spin' can be correctly imposed on religiously-grounded concepts of human self-restraint can be questioned, and two thousand years ago 'environmental issues' would probably not even have been recognized, at least not in forms familiar to us today. It is also important to clarify that human self-restraint does not imply an indiscriminate halt to human impacts on the environment such that the attainment of basic living standards by the poorest hundreds of millions would be prejudiced. But the cedars of Lebanon and lush vegetation described in the Bible being long gone, and the area substantially converted to desert largely by human hands, the Middle East is a reflection of global processes by which the land has been transformed in the absence of any pervasive conservation ethic.

Looking forward, present trends in the advance of human occupation would eliminate major areas of remaining natural ecosystems in the twinkling of an eye compared to the 1000-year timescales we now survey. Added to this are human-induced climatic changes that may completely change the suitability of any given point on the Earth's surface for supporting its current biota,

including humans and their agricultural crops. Other problems have been put in place that will last millennia, ranging from nuclear wastes to chloroflouorocarbons such as C_2F_6 , that, even were emissions to halt completely today, will no doubt continue to catalyse stratospheric ozone destruction for the next 10 000 years.

So, if I am asked to choose between market forces and environmental humility as watchwords for sustainable human conduct in the third millennium, my vote is clearly for humility. Practically-speaking, I suspect this may not be too far removed from the intent of our predecessor of two thousand years ago. Self-centredness and materialism are not promising as sole bases for the life of individuals in society, nor are their equivalents, namely anthropocentrism, promising for the human species seeking sustenance amongst the whole assemblage of life huddled on the Earth.

NICHOLAS POLUNIN

Editor