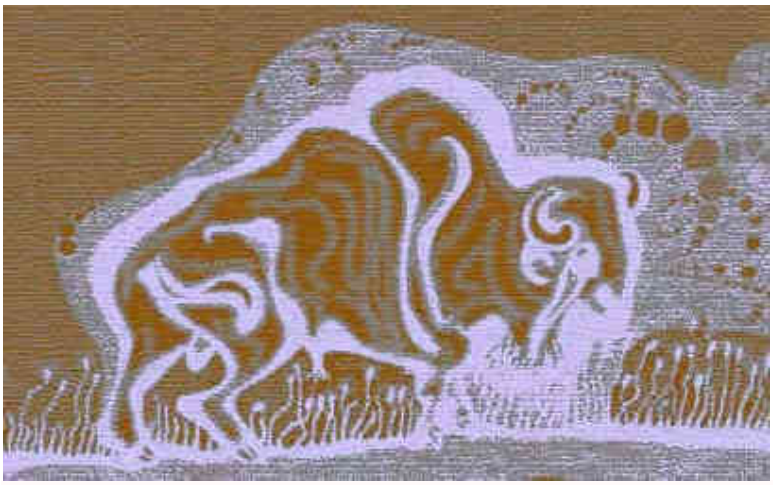
For the Seventh generation

From the Interspecies Newsletter



Before the traditional Iroquois convened their consul meetings, they invoked this declaration :

In our every deliberation we must consider the impact of our decisions on the next seven generations.

Thereafter, any vote included an equal vote cast by a representative who spoke specifically for the needs, the survival, and the dignity of those who would live a hundred and fifty years in the future. For the Iroquois, the generational format of their council defined a longterm relationship between government and ecology. The rights of future generations never became an issue of policy because it was, instead, the very context of policy. Conservation was, thus, the very foundation upon which their culture was built. The medium was the message.

In the process of blueprinting our own American system of government, Thomas Jefferson was said to have drawn much inspiration from the Iroquois version of representational democracy. It makes one wonder about things that might have been. For example, had Jefferson written the rights of future generations into the U.S. bill of rights, would we, who live ten generations after Jefferson, still be dependent upon non-renewable fossil fuels which causes global warming? Or imagine what life would be like today if, a hundred years ago, we had set in place a public mechanism to test the ecological value of the automobile or, fifty years ago, the social value of the television set. But there was no debate. Unlike the Iroquois, our parents and our great-grandparents had no public mechanism that spoke to the longterm effects of their inventions.

Nor do have any mechanism today to examine genetic engineering, or even no-brainers like excessive product packaging. Rather, we remain saddled to technological "progress", and it renders us deaf to anyone who would speak intuitively for the rights and needs of future generations. One might well wionder how the future would be different if we started electing politicians possessed of better hearing.

Knowledge or Wisdom

Whereas wildness was central to the Iroquois' daily perception of the world, it is reduced to the margins of our own lives. We have little memory of what it is we have lost. Because language reflects perception, we are able to locate faint signs of this perceptual loss in our language. We find, for instance, that our culture often uses the term natural resources as if it were synonymous with nature and wildness. The prevailing educational system instructs our children in great depth how to observe nature, while it teaches almost nothing about nurturing a sense of communion with nature. The semantics of the distinction are telling. Observing suggests standing outside looking in. Communion signifies a conscious linkage.Language not only reflects perception, it reflects public policy as well. Such a connection may explain the origination of wilderness policies molded by men of power who get their information from data sheets often compiled by vested interests, and who debate the future of nature and animals inside cavernous artificially-lit halls within an urban environment. These are well-educated people who, just like the rest of us, have been taught that nature is an observable resource needing to be managed. Their education taught them well to regard the human relationship to nature as a body of quantifiable information. Is that what nature is, quantities of data? Echoes reverberate through the halls of congress assuring us in a self-assured language that, yes, certainly, those are precisely the measures our

system of government uses to determine wilderness legislation.

How else could we do it? Anyone have a better idea? Actually, somebody possessed of a different language that mirrors a different perception of nature, might make the observation that our need to gather data is always going to reflect a parallel need to exploit that data. Or expressed more obliquely: knowledge is power but not necessarily wisdom.

The legislator's data sheets are prepared by biologists whose own perceptions about nature are formed by the same educational and cultural mores as the rest of us. Their data may be objective, although whether it reflects nature is far less certain.

Actually, policy reflects science reflects culture reflects language reflects perception reflects in a circle back to policy. Each spoke of this wheel influences every other spoke. The wheel also suggests that our culture's much-sought after objectivity reflects a point of view—at best a relative or cultural truth—but never an absolute truth. Data remains objective, but is revealed to be somewhat of a fraud in its role as an arbiter of ecological perception.The result is a distorted view of nature. The culture assigns much utilitarian value to its numbers, its resources, and too little value to the idea that nature might possess some inherent value apart from ourselves.

This data-driven nature of ours also does a disappearing act; it ceases to exist the moment our attention flies to some other issue. Where did it go, you ask? This answer is: everywhere outside ourselves, because our minds have never learned to register nature as the very context of our lives. Pragmatists assert that this compartmentalization is the only way the culture can sustain itself. How else could the economy appear to grow strong while nature is everywhere in full retreat?

Government policy overwhelmingly reflects data-driven perceptions about nature. The policy makers find it unauthoritative impractical, (or simply impossible) to legislate ecological policy guided, not by data, but by relationship, morality, or a sense of place. They are not easily moved when an earnest non-expert rises from the throng to deliver an emotional harangue that declares, for instance that fisheries policy is simply wrongheaded because it is causing the sea turtles to go extinct. "If it's wrong,"declare the legislators in response, "Where's the data to prove it?" This easily prompts an industry spokesperson to demonstrate that experts do, indeed, place a dollar value on disappearing turtles, and that this value is of a lesser amount than the value of the shrimp industry left to fish unimpeded by an impractical netting methodology that does not entrap turtles.

Obviously, something is amiss when those who can and do "prove it" use that proof to implement policies that prompt the aerial shooting of wolves, the virtual annihilation of pelagic dolphins in the cause of pet food, the nuclear stockpile. Such horrors will continue to unfold as long as legislators remain unwilling to acknowledge their inability to govern a nature that is not a synonym for natural resources. No time soon will they acknowledge that the expert who steps forward is, almost always, no expert at all. He's just another well paid lackey for business as usual.

Linkage and Linkage

Lately we are told that the science of ecology, which illuminates the linkage inherent within nature, will alter the current equation. Because perception reflects policy, one needs to ask if this field of ecology defines the science of linkage or the experience of linkage? Recognizing the difference between the two terms provides a crucial clue about the welfareof future generations.

The first term reflects a data-driven relationship to nature. Biologists point their feelers outward; assuring that the data describes a linkage that exists outside their own perceptions. Yet because they work so hard to maintain this separation, biologists can never make the environmental crisis go away. They don't approach it directly. Even at their most constructive, they do no better than to retain a certain aloof neutrality. Even those ecologists who display a clear passion to preserve the environment must recognize that their perceptual center is counterproductive to their goal.

By contrast, we live inside the second, subjective definition of ecology. The experience of linkage includes our perceptions, feelings, intuitions, responsibilities, and hopefully our right relation to

nature.There is nothing much objective about this second definition, which explains why it doesn't make for much of a science. A case could be made that the experience of linkage actually refutes objectivity. Objective linkage—the science of ecology—is an oxymoron.

Yet so many ecologists care so deeply about the environment that one might wonder if there could be a new kind of science not shackled to the objective pose; new kind of science not driven by data.Human beings are not born with a natural predilection to destroy nature. Nor does the destruction occur independent of human intentionality. In fact, as the concept of the seventh generation is meant to demonstrate, the environmental crisis is something we are taught to percieve, and thus to perpetuate.

Regard the result of our cultural training to be a kind of psychosis. In fact many environmental writers have pointed out that our global resource dependency is an addiction. Gar Smith, writing for Earth Island Journal, once described the Exxon Valdez oil spill this way:

> As the damages mount with each new outrage, oil company officials are beginning to sound like problem drinkers who continue making promises they can't keep...Oil-hauling, like alcoholism is a form of addictive behavior that is inevitably destructive.

It's the same old story told by any growth industry that possesses too much marketing momentum to the detriment of the seventh generation. Or permit me to offer a local example. In my own rural county, some gun-shooting addict recently started using the endangered trumpeter swans for target practice. Last winter we had 15 swans on the local pond, this winter there are none. The cure for this addictive psychosis may seem heretical to someone educated to honor, without question, the scientific worldview. It is this:

the environmental crisis is a crisis of perception.

The crisis in perception begins and ends inside each one of us. Retaining the separation between subject and object exacerbates the problem. The cure demands that each of us overhaul our perceptions about nature. We act connected when we get connected. Our actions, our lifestyle, our policies will all follow. Paraphrasing the Buddhist concept of the Boddhisattava, no one is cured until everyone is cured.This cure does not rely on a Gandhi, a Martin Luther King, to arrive and lead us into the promised land.

Imagine a future in which the de facto authority our society presently grants to scientists to describe nature and, in fact, speak on nature's behalf, is granted, instead, to ethicists, musicians, dancers, poets, shamans, even children. What all these seemingly disparate people share in common is a deep subjective trust of life and linkage. These are people who give real power to intuition.Let's choose a group who grant metaphors more authority than data. These are people who possess a perceptual grasp about the abiding unity of nature because, unlike many politicians and all scientists, they do not attempt to stand outside their subject.

Not bringing a shopping list to the task, they comprehend the key difference between nature and natural resources. I am suggesting here that the culture's relationship to nature will improve dramatically on the day that Senate subcommittees about land use start consulting our best dreamers as wisemen and wisewomen and then calmly elevate them to the critical position currently occupied by the technocrats: that of defining and explaining nature for the rest of us.

Actually, modern Western culture may be unique in not already doing so. Future generations suffer because of it.Everything about our culture recommends that the seventh generation does not actually exist. I would suggest, instead, that they are real people. They do exist, but for the moment, they remain incapable of doing much of anything on their own behalf. They are seated along the temporal sidelines as it were, holding their collective breath, waiting in anticipation, watching how our future (yours and mine) is going to transmute into their present. Perhaps we can give them more substance by changing the way we perceive them.

Take a perceptual leap with me. Can you hear them? Listen closely. Their calling is really not much more than a low pulse, not unlike the background hum of the big bang, or perhaps your own heartbeat. Just like the human heartbeat, the seventh generation is singing its quiet song just about everywhere these days. Teach yourself how to listen. Teach a friend. An enemy.

—For Earthday, Jim Nollman, April 2000