

James Lovelock: The State of the Planet

Summary

Imagine that you are standing on the stump of a giant red-wood tree that has just been felled. It was a vast tree weighing over 2000 tons and was over 100 meters tall, a spire of lignin and cellulose. A strange thing about this tree is that during its life nearly all of it was dead wood. As a tree grows, there is just a thin skin of living tissue around the circumference. The wood inside is dead, as is the bark that protects the delicate tissue. More than 97 per cent of the tree we stand on was dead before it was cut down.

Now in this way a tree is very like the earth itself. Around the surface of the earth is a thin skin of living tissue of which both trees and humans are a part. Rocks and air are dead, although both are either the direct products of life or have been greatly modified by its presence. Is it possible that the earth is alive like the tree?

My view of the earth sees a self-sustaining system named Gaia like one of those forest trees. Although some colleagues are beginning to take this notion seriously, most prefer to see the earth as just a ball of rock moistened by the ocean. If mainstream science is right and the earth is like this, it might not matter what we do to it as long as we don't foul it too much for our own good.

But what if instead the earth is a vast living organism in which typically the separate species are expendable? If a species such as humans adversely affects the environment, then in time it will be eliminated with no more pity than is shown by the micro-brain of an ICBM on course to its target. If the earth is like this, then to survive we face the hard task of reintegrating creation, or learning again to be part of the earth and not separate from it.

The life of the scientist used to be that of the natural philosopher closely in touch with the real world. It was a life both deeply sensuous and deeply religious. I sometimes wonder if the loss of soul from science results from sensory deprivation. A consequence of the fact that 95 per cent of us scientists live in cities. How can we love the living world if we can no longer hear the bird song, never smell fresh air, nevermore see the stars?

The attraction of the city is seductive. City life is a soap opera that never ends. It reinforces and strengthens the heresy of humanism, that narcissistic belief that nothing important happens that is not a human interest.

City living corrupts. It gives a false sense of priority over environmental hazard. We become inordinately obsessed about personal mortality. We tend to ignore the consequences of greenhouse gas accumulation, agricultural excess and forest clearance. We are witnesses to the disintegration of creation without realizing we are the cause.

The humid tropics are both a habitat for humans and the heartland of Gaia. That habitat is being removed at a ruthless pace. Yet in the First World we try to justify the preservation of the tropical forests on the feeble grounds that they are home of rare species-- even of plants containing rare drugs that could cure cancer. This could be, and yet the tropic forests are so much more than that. Through their capacity to evaporate vast volumes of water, the forests keep themselves cool by wearing a sunshade of white, reflecting clouds. Their replacement by crude cattle farming could precipitate a disaster for the billions of poor in the Third World.

There are so many things we do that are harmless in moderation and malign only in excess. I find it helpful to think of the three deadly C's as cars, cattle and chain saws. Yet none of them evil if used in moderation.

I speak as the shop steward of the bacteria and the less attractive forms of life. My constituency is all other life than humans. I have taken this role because there are so many who speak for people. To see the earth as a living organism makes tangible the concept of stewardship. We can stay as selfish as we are but be guided in our selfishness to keep a world that is healthy and beautiful-- for our grandchildren and our other partners in Gaia.