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Unlucky Planet?



There is a planet at the centre of the known universe and, according to the god of at least three of the major religions on that planet, man was given dominion over all the animals and plants. It is a shame that this was not given to woman, to nurture and care for, because man has cared little.

In the name of that same god, man spread out from the stronghold of those major religions to claim dominion over other peoples – societies who cared for their animals and plants and the very earth they were part of and who lived in harmony with the cyclical nature of their world. The oral histories of many of these societies accurately reached back for tens of thousands of years, back to times so far in the past that the adherents of those major religions had no knowledge of it, whose memory went back no further than their creation story, calculated as being some seven thousand years ago.

The linear approach to life and its management spread across the surface of the nonlinear globe. The idea eventually flourished that anything and everything was there for the taking. The bounty of the planet was seen as boundless, a view made possible by a belief in untrammelled entitlement. It allowed the unquestioned use of anything that grew or roamed on the planet's surface, including people who were not adherents of any of those major religions. It allowed the digging out from the earth of anything that seemed useful or valuable or both. It allowed the pouring of muck and rubbish into the streams and oceans, because the oceans were deemed able to infinitely absorb it all.

Or so it was believed.

It was also believed that the bounty of the sea was infinite in its capacity to feed the exponentially growing mass of humanity, and many of their pets.

Many people believe that this planet is more than just a rock circling a star. They believe that the Earth is in some way alive, from its centre out to beyond its atmosphere. They believe that it is aware of what goes on at its surface and responds to that.

If that is so, it is an unwise planet, having allowed *Homo sapiens* to evolve as far as it has, to dominate all other species and the environment they depend on for survival.

Collectively, humankind is living the life of an addicted gambler. It is addicted to one more year of economic growth and profit, and then one more. It is gambling that the result of that growth, based on continuing exploitation and befoulment, will not be dire yet; that if the consequences may eventually be disastrous, some humans will find ways of preventing or mitigating such disaster.

And like any addicted gambler, humankind is fully aware of what it is doing: gambling away the house it lives in.

If the believers in Gaia are correct, the planet may reach the end of its tolerance of us and do away with us. Or the same result may be achieved through the feedback mechanisms we can observe now, as we pollute ever more and watch food resources dwindle, ground water recede, more people becoming ill from chemical pollution and ‘natural’ disasters increasing in frequency and scale.

If our wellbeing and even our very survival depend on the biodiversity around us, we are already in dire straits. The planet is losing species at an estimated rate of dozens each day, compared with a ‘background’ extinction rate of one to five species per year.¹ And the biosphere is in dire straits because, if we depend on biodiversity for our wellbeing, so does every other species.

Humans are destroying forests, arable land, streams, aquifers and oceans. We may also be ‘destroying’ the atmosphere, from the point of view of life that depends on a certain range of temperatures and a certain range of gas concentrations to survive. Humans have developed and released into the biosphere tens of thousands of chemicals, many of them toxic to many lifeforms – bacterial, fungal, plant and animal, including humans. Many of these chemicals have been aimed at killing insects. Bees, which are insects, are in drastic decline in some areas.² Apart from the effect on honey production for human consumption, bees, wild and domesticated, are responsible for the pollination of many of our food crops.

What is this planet to do? Is it already doing it in an attempt to rid itself of the species that appears to be destroying its biosphere? It was the emergence of life that led to the current mix of oxygen, nitrogen and carbon dioxide in the atmosphere.³ It could, therefore, be argued that the presence of life made the planet what it is today. But Earth without any life on it would still be the third planet from Sol and would probably keep doing what it’s doing for another one to five billion years, when Sol gets too hot and the oceans boil away along with most of the atmosphere (around one billion years from now) or, later, when ‘our’ star expands and swallows Earth (around 5 billion years away). There are all sorts of other events that could see most life wiped out (including what humans are now doing), but none of these is likely to sterilise the planet within the next billion years.⁴

So, is Earth an unlucky planet? I would say, no it is not. Nor is it lucky. To conclude either way would be a human-centric approach. We care about our own survival and some of us care about other species. It is unlikely that any other species has any concept of luck, or worries whether any of its individuals or its entire species will survive. There are many species that exhibit what looks like grief if a member of its group or family dies, but concern for long-term survival seems to be a uniquely human preoccupation. Which makes it so much stranger that humans, knowing they may be destroying themselves and the biosphere, seem so reluctant to stop doing so.

1. see, for instance, www.biologicaldiversity.org

2. see, for instance, www.economist.com

3. see, for instance, www.scientificamerican.com

4. see, for instance, www.bbc.com