

Opinion Exchange

REACTIONS AND DIALOGUE ON THE ISSUES OF THE DAY

More powerful than we imagine

• When it comes to damage humankind can wreak on planet Earth, people have a way of making the far-fetched come to fruition.

By CRAIG BOWRON

You've heard the facts about global warming, but it all seems so unimaginable, so inconceivable, as if it were an overhyped, ecofriendly version of the deeply disappointing Y2K Cataclysmic Hoax. Could it be true?

So forget the facts for a moment and focus on precedent: We humans have a history of underestimating ourselves, and what human civilization can do. Sure, there's a certain humility, a certain anti-hubris that makes global warming skepticism rather attractive ("we tiny humans are simply incapable of triggering planetary changes"). But the track record of Homo sapiens suggests otherwise.

We couldn't possibly outfish the Grand Banks, the 280,000-square-kilometer swath of ocean that is (or was) the world's most productive

fishery. And yet we have.

When Lewis and Clark paddled back down the Missouri to St. Louis in 1806, did they imagine that America ever could or would settle the brutally vast expanse they had just taken 28 months to traverse? By 1869, the transcontinental railroad was in place and the primal American West the group once explored had vanished.

Last year TPT produced a documentary titled "Minnesota, a History of the Land." In one segment, a lumber company scout following the Rum River north to Mille Lacs in 1847 breathlessly noted, "The pine was inexhaustible. Seventy saw mills in seventy years could not exhaust the white pine I have seen on the Rum River."

It took 25 years to remove every tree the scout had laid eyes on, and another 25 to denude the entire state. Wrong again.

We have a way of making the far-

fetched come to fruition — of making the unprecedented come true. Boat tours down Broadway? Gondolas bobbing through the streets of Miami? America's Breadbasket becomes the Ronco Food Dehydrator? Impossible....

Like the Earth, the human body is a buffered system, designed to maintain an equilibrium. Myriad enzymes and catalysts work to maintain the status quo. Drink a cup of saltwater and you pee it out. Generate excess carbon dioxide and you exhale it off. A chemical equation leans to the left at one pH, and tilts to the right with a fractionally different pH. Miraculous. We are walking symphonies, walking through a symphonic world.

But any buffered system has its limits, and when they're exceeded, the delicate high-wire act becomes a free fall. It's true, we don't know what a warmer Earth will look like, but we have to prepare for what we cannot afford to miss. Patients coming into the emergency room with chest pain are taken very seriously, because a heart attack has lethal implications. Even with a low clinical suspicion, we still order tests to assure ourselves that something mortal is not at work.

It's safer to prevent heart disease than it is to treat it.

Chalk up Al Gore's graphs and statistics to Power Point magic and simmering presidential ambitions. Embrace our record temps as the normal upside of our planet's roller coaster thermostat. Explain it all away as more Tree-Hugger Propaganda, as "Revenge of the Spotted Owl, Part II." But not taking global warming seriously is like unplugging the brain that put us in the control booth.

Place a few colonies of bacteria in the center of a Petri dish and they will grow to the edge of the dish and die. You won't hear any conversations about resource management, consumption standards, gross domestic product, the future. This is truly mindless behavior.

The daunting, massive expanse of Earth now looks something more like a Petri dish. We deceive ourselves when we suggest that we are powerless to change it, when it's we who have changed it. There will always be a reason to do nothing. Preventive medicine doesn't begin in the morgue. We must prepare to understand and deal with the things that we cannot afford to miss.

We are the man behind the curtain.
We are the great and powerful Oz.

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