

Dieback: A Vision of

BY JAMES BARNES

The glorious revolution will not free this land; the rising of the oppressed against the capitalist master will fail. The worker will not triumph over the ruling class, nor will women and persecuted peoples gain equality in a brave new world. The planet will not be "saved" by the people's new ecological consciousness.

But there will be rebellions, war, famine and, oh yes, industrial collapse. And there will be wilderness where there are now tree farms. Ruined cities choked with blackberries, kudzu or blowing sand will echo sad howls in the silence. Grazing herds will move across an empty plain, and great trees will rise up from the road beds. Humans will survive too, much as they always have done—catching what they can, scrabbling in the dirt and wresting a poor existence from the soil. By turns ignorant, wise, sick, joyful and greedy, the people of this land will get on with the business of raising their children and burying them.

Have you ever watched someone die of hunger? I haven't, and probably most of you haven't either. But you've seen the pictures from whatever godforsaken country is tearing itself apart lately, and it's not pretty. Now contemplate five billion people starving to death, maybe including yourself. Imagine an endless century of desperate migrations to overwhelmed refugee camps, old men left to die quietly in the sun, infants with dysentery draining their lives away, wide-eyed children with swollen stomachs. Imagine cholera or plague, and the young men gone to armed thuggery, brutalizing the wretched people. Don't think about the young girls.

How long would you last if the Safeway closed? What would you do, hunt and gather? The edible wildlife of this country will survive only as long as folks have regular food sources, as game regulations wouldn't stop hungry people from eating whatever they can catch. Designated wilderness is meaningless without the law enforcement that would be needed elsewhere to deal with evacuations, emergency food distribution, rebellion and banditry. Lumber and firewood are valuable, especially in winter. Environmentalism—what kind of rich-kid crap is that?

As Americans, we have a culturally ingrained notion that for our problems we can always find solutions—meaning we expect to get what we want. This is a peculiarly naive and transient view of the world, born of a century of wealth and increasingly global dominance that poorly reflects the long-term realities of history. What was the solution to the plague?

What is the solution to an earthquake? These are absurd questions, as inexorable forces both biological and geological are beyond problem-solving. Diseases can be eradicated, but disease cannot. You can build earthquake-resistant structures, but when the Big One comes, all bets are off.

Well, what is the answer to the problem that (a) there are some six billion people on this world, growing to eight, or ten or more, (b) the remaining amount of uncultivated arable land is declining rapidly, (c) formerly fertile land is falling out of production, (d) ocean stocks are damn near exhausted, (e) petroleum reserves are finite, and (f) industrial agriculture and food distribution are intimately dependent on said petroleum reserves?

The solution, of course, is simple. Open a basic college level ecology text and you can find it: when the carrying capacity of a given ecosystem for a particular species is exceeded, that species will eventually have its numbers reduced to below that threshold. After overshoot, the new carrying capacity is often lower than it was before the population grew out of balance, as a species in crisis is prone to damaging its environment. And how does a seriously overpopulated species reduce its numbers? It *dies back*. Death is the answer to too much life.

Humans are clever and generally decent creatures, so long as we're comfortable, and should be expected to find ways to ameliorate our necessary and inevitable decline. ~~In a world of perfect social justice, we would see to it that food reserves were distributed equally.~~ We'd place limitations on cultivation and foraging to protect ecosystems and species diversity. We'd establish mandatory birth control and child limits, remaining mindful of injustices done to many already-small ethnic populations. We'd take care to ensure that people in currently less powerful parts of the globe, minority populations and women didn't suffer disproportionately



We print 'em just like you write 'em.

THE VISION...

continued from page 3

As usual, we can expect greed and chaos to turn a bad situation into sheer hell. People will die, but not in one fell swoop. Dieback doesn't have to be fast. Our numbers will be ratcheted down by infant mortality, infanticide, early death from the combined effects of malnutrition and the diseases of overcrowding and unsanitary conditions, famine, death by violence in war and social chaos, exotic epidemics engendered from diseases found in previously uninhabited land, etc. And each time a region undergoes wrenching, violent upheaval as ethnic groups or social classes battle over land rights and resources, that region will grow less able to support a human population.

If dieback is the short-term complement to overshoot, the long-term consequences to the (briefly) overabundant human population are grave as well: Extinction is a threat, certainly. Persistence at low numbers is another, more likely scenario. As in boreal forests and the arctic, wild swings between overhigh and very low population levels is also not unlikely in the unstable ecosystems left in an impoverished world of badly reduced vertebrate diversity.

To biocentrists, the effects of the human boom and bust on other species are of equal concern. As humans explore and vacuum every corner of the globe for sustenance, the land and sea grow less able to support other creatures that share similar needs to our own. An overexpanding invader species like humans takes over and bleeds ecosystems in a descending order of degradation. First, we eliminate direct competitors (wolves, bears, Neanderthals). Humans, uniquely, have also eliminated our own traditional predators like tigers or leopards and have forced the surviving predator populations to eschew people as a food source in exchange for their lives. Second, we eliminate indirect competitors by crowding them out. Agriculture monocrops, tree farms and other forms of ecosystem conversion and usurpation for human needs are examples of this. We have hunted and gathered out wild food sources, and basic ecosystem productivity is waning; farming exhausts the soil, native plant and animal diversity declines through extirpation and habitat loss, and pollution, the waste poisons of our industrial life, accumulates.



There are those who think that human-population collapse cannot happen. That's wishful thinking, and an example of "human exceptionalism,"—the idea that people are exempt from the basic economy of life. Dieback might not happen, but it *can*. Bodies have measurable needs, which makes carrying capacity a natural law. Minds have less measurable but equally important needs—could one be the need to deny the unpleasant? Because we have used our heads to come up with trading, regional food specialization, agricultural innovations and use of fossil energy, all of which allow us to overcome the limits imposed by local, annual ecosystem productivity, some think that we can just figure a way out of the coming crisis. But the facts cannot be willed away; there is a concrete, material number of people that can be reasonably supported by this planet, and we're way past that.

What could we do to avoid the current trap? We could gracefully reduce our population—but that's the organized world of perfect social justice again, in which we do not live. We could begin the wholesale conversion of all biosphere productivity to human needs by replacing all wild species with genetically tailored varieties designed to produce food and fuel for humans—a repulsive possibility we are already heading towards, but one still requiring social controls to prevent subsequent overshoot of this level of increased carrying capacity, not to mention the little ethical problem of exterminating all other wild species.

We're going to have to get used to the idea that, for us at least, everything is not going to be all right. That suffering and death should be the inescapable lot of mere animals such as ourselves, no matter how divine our intellect or refined our sensibilities, strikes exceptionists as distasteful, impossible, even medieval in its mortal finality. As always it is the weak—the truly poor, teeming in squalid shantytowns—who will

suffer the most. The rich can afford to feed their children. It's not fair; the already-wretched always get hit the hardest, not the tofu-chewing dreadhead with the mountain bike consuming 60 times that of the majority of people. He's got a lot to lose before he goes hungry.

One way or another, justly, fairly or not, humans will be far less numerous than at present. The rest of the biosphere, what's left of it, will take a quick breather. Natural selection forges on.

