

Earth's resources

By T.D. Holmes

People today have what seem, on reflection, to be some really quite strange ideas.

Impatience has swept our society by storm. If we want something, we want it now. If we want to be somewhere, we want to be there now. If we have to wait for something, we want to speed it up. We want the quickest and easiest ways to make money. We want the quickest and easiest ways to have fun. When we become ill, we want to be better instantly. When we are hurt, we'd sooner take away the pain than find its underlying cause.

At the moment it is possible for us to have all this. But it is a really quite strange idea that it should, can and will always be possible.

Immersed in an excessive consumption of natural resources to make our lives so quick and convenient, we have lost all grasp of things taking time. That which took millions of years of time to grow, we consume like we haven't time to spare. Indeed, even with all our time saving devices, many of us still have very little of this precious resource. Perhaps we have such really quite strange ideas because we have so little time to spend really thinking about anything. Instead we follow the leader, trusting in the ideologies on which our societies are based. Ideologies, which are the root of our problems.

Many economic ideologies exist for how resources should be allocated and consumed. The effectiveness of these ideologies is assessed by how much material wealth they accumulate from these resources, and how this wealth is distributed. As the resources seem so vast compared with our requirements most economic models treat them as being infinite. Western society is largely based upon such models.

No economic theory, no matter how popular, can alter the reality that resources are finite. Think of this on a domestic scale. Here the human race is like a house owner and the resources are like his dishes. This house owner has only a few dishes, one for a mealtime and one in reserve. Because his dishes are so few, the necessity to wash them is obvious. So each time he uses them he washes them and this way it never reaches the point where he has no dishes left. Then, one day, he finds a cupboard full of clean dishes, too many to count! He begins to use them. Over time he no longer feels the need to wash up, and spends the time doing other things instead, taking this unexpected find for granted and often using more dishes than he needs. Then comes the day he opens the cupboard to find only a few pots left, and turns to see an enormous pile of dirty pots. Too many to count!

It makes no difference if a resource is numbered in its billions or trillions. Consumed without being replenished, there will inevitably arrive the day when it will run out, no matter what kind of resource it is.

Even with the good intentions of an economic model, consumerism indulges our desires for personal gain, our bad habits, and feeding a bad habit can only make it grow.

On a personal level, consumerism, over-indulgence and desire for personal profit, harms those we take from. But the greatest damage is what it does to ourselves, even though this doesn't seem so whilst we are distracted by our indulgence.

The same is true on a grander scale. Indulging in the resources we have discovered we don't realise the damage we're doing to ourselves as a species. If this continues, then only when we can no longer indulge will we realise how great the damage is. Like a drunkard run out of drink, facing the almighty hangover and grim reality to come.

We consume far more than we need, and waste resources by diverting them to minimising our own labour. It damages us, and often increases the amount of resources consumed as a whole, by both ourselves and our labour saving machines. Our forgotten ideology is moderation. We must learn when enough is enough. Advances in science and technology give us new ways to consume resources but makes them no less finite. The main focus of our research, instead of giving us more to consume, should be in enabling us to live with less.

Should we want plenty of something, it has to grow and accumulate first. Patience is another forgotten ideology. Once again we are stuck in a culture of short-termism, where thought is only given to the near future and if results can't be produced in this time then rarely is anything started.

An acorn does not grow into a full sized oak overnight. We cannot instantly accumulate all the energy we want, but if we develop processes aside from our day to day use of it, that gradually store it, then we can build vast reserves. We all know that the best results come from allowing things to take their time, but we aren't willing to wait that long. Ancient civilisations built great wonders with patience. Imagine, with all of our discoveries, what we could do with it!

Look at the way nature works. In the natural world, things take as long as they take. The fertile ecosystems that thrive and grow in size and diversity, all took their time to grow and establish. There is no such thing as waste. The resources never run out, because they are never used up, they are always in motion. For everything that is made, there exists a way of unmaking it, so then the resources can always be re-used. When a new "product" arrives on the scene, nature adapts to it, and a way to unmake it arises.

Humans do not do this. We tend to extract the resources from our surroundings and alter them in an unnatural way for our own benefit. Once this particular use has expired, the product is then simply abandoned. We make things so that they cannot be unmade, and in doing so we stop them from moving and end their use.

If there is a future for us, it is not just in recycling. It is in ensuring that nothing is permanent. Not buildings, roads, railways, power lines, pipe lines, electronics, vehicles, furnishings, or anything else. All things designed so that they can be unmade into their raw materials as easily as they were assembled, every part of them. With every firm like an organism and every worker like an enzyme, forming a complete cycle of resources, where nothing is wasted, and all used in moderation, reducing the pressure on nature's cycles.

A natural cycle is like an elastic band. When pressure is applied to it, it doesn't instantly break, but stretches to accommodate the change, whilst also pulling back. When we interfere with nature's cycles, we stretch the band. Our excessive fossil fuel consumption, for example, and the greenhouse gases it yields pulls on the band. We do not instantly see any damage, because the cycle stretches to accommodate the change. But if we continue to pull, one of two things will happen; either the band rebounds back, or it snaps. Altering some other part of the environment in an attempt

to alter the initial unnatural change (e.g. trying to raise the activity of the carbon sinks by affecting nutrient cycles) will only put strain on another part of the band and increase the potential to rebound or snap.

If not global warming, then some other problem of a similar or even greater magnitude will arise if we don't stop stretching, and we will inevitably damage either ourselves, or both us and the natural cycles on which we still depend.

We must release the pressure we put on nature's resource cycles. To imply that the world's resources exist purely for our consumption implies that we have an absolute right over the rest of nature. That one life deserves the absolute right over another. True or not, we can hardly say that the damage we do is for survival alone. The resources that we extract from the earth, take from other living things, or even from each other, we are using for our own convenience and it is this attitude that is causing us the problems that we experience, and it will continue to cause us problems in the future if it continues.

I refuse to believe that this behaviour is in our human nature. I believe it is nothing more than a bad habit that the human race needs to shake off.

We have sailed the oceans, flown through the sky, mastered the flow of electricity, tapped the power within the atom, built wondrous and beautiful structures, developed cures for injuries and illnesses, created vast information and communication networks, travelled up into space, even landed on the moon.

With such magnificent achievements behind us, surely we can overcome a few bad habits. In time, we can put moderation, patience and cycles back into our moral fibre. We can plant seeds of change that our children or grandchildren will benefit from, so they in turn can show their own offspring the same courtesy.

I don't mean to say that we should stop advancing in science and technology. But at the same time we should return to living alongside nature and letting nature live alongside us. What harm could that do us? As a friend of mine once said;

“Sometimes the best way forward is a step back.”