

End of Life

Written by Blanca Mesa, BT Contributor
June 2018

With what we know, you'd think we'd change



e have lived our lives by the assumption that what was good for us would be good for the world. We have been wrong. We must change our lives so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption, that what is good for the world will be good for us.” -- Wendell Berry

In *Racing Extinction*, filmmaker Louis Psihoyos wishes us to fall in love. “My hope is if we could show people the beauty of these animals, we will save them,” says Psihoyos at the beginning of the film. The documentary is a wakeup call about humanity’s role in the extinction of species. At the rate we’re going, it’s expected that in a hundred years, 50 percent of the world’s species will be gone. Many are already disappearing.

Florida panthers, dying coral reefs, and the diminutive grasshopper sparrow make appearances in the film. They are all species in peril, whose ecosystems are damaged and disappearing. The grasshopper’s cousin, the dusky seaside sparrow, was declared extinct in 1990.

It’s not just because of climate change. It’s also about our ravaging appetite. The sparrows’ habitat has been cut 90 percent for development and agriculture. From tree nuts to shark fins, we go for it with such blind gusto -- until every last thing we coveted is gone.

As one atrocity after another unrolled, I could hear the gasps of regret and defeat throughout the theater. And I felt the collective sorrow when we heard the song from the last male of a species calling for a female who will never come. And now he, too, is gone.

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I also felt a collective sigh of relief when the movie ended, because we could stop thinking about the rampant destruction our very existence has wrought on this planet.

As we solemnly filed out, one of the organizers called to us, "Save water!" Yet it didn't seem right to consider shorter showers as a solution to the loss of half the world's species.

How is saving water or driving electric cars or planting butterfly gardens going to bring back the thousands of dead sharks whose fins were arrayed on tables at a specialty food mart? How is that going to reverse a warming planet where plankton in the ocean -- the very source of 50 percent of the world's oxygen -- aren't even safe? How was that going to save Earth?

And yet the film ends on a hopeful note, and with an empowering plea, conveyed with the hash tag: #startwith1thing.

There are things we are asked to do on a daily basis: saving paper by printing double-sided, recycling our print cartridges, and replacing incandescent bulbs with LED lights. There's no clear answer that these small measures in aggregate could save the planet. They could, however, save a few trees, which could add up to a forest.

Cumulatively, every forest saved means saving hundreds of thousands of gallons of water that go to produce pulp and eliminating the pollution from chemicals and wastewater. It means the trees saved hold firm the soil that doesn't run off to pollute waterways. It means habitat for wildlife is preserved.

After you #startwith1thing, do another. Make it bigger than a consumer choice, urges Greg Hamra, a climate change educator and Miami leader of Citizens' Climate Lobby, an international group lobbying for the reduction of carbon emissions, the cause of climate change.

"Personal greening lifestyle choices can't be used as a proxy for solving the problem," Hamra says. "It's not enough to change our light bulbs -- we have to also change our leaders and our

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policies.”

As population growth continues dramatically -- the U.S. is expected to grow from 305 million in 2009 to 439 million by 2050 -- there will be even more pressure on natural resources. Without a drastic change of habits, improved technology, and conservation, and leaders who understand the implications, the environmental impact will be devastating.

Significant change is not going to happen until there is also an understanding of the finiteness of the planet's resources and a focus on ecology -- the interrelationship of all living organisms. Or as naturalist John Muir explained it: “When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe.”

At the end of *Racing Extinction*, the audience is treated to projections of panthers and whales on the sides of buildings, six stories in size, staring back at us, leaving us to ask, why? Knowing what we are doing, why do we keep at it? And what can we do to stop the great dying?

#Startwith1thing and, like the building-size birds projected on the high-rises in *Racing Extinction*, make it bigger than yourself.

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