

As Judged by your Piers

Our amazing generation

This is a truly special moment of human history. We are poised not only at the cusp of ten thousand years of development, but also teeter at the brink of a chasm of financial chaos, resource depletion, pollution, disease and war. My generation has experienced astonishing progress, but also seen the world population double to horrendous - and unsustainable - levels.

In our lifetimes, we have witnessed the decoding of our genome, the discovery of hundreds of extra-solar planets, MRI scanning, the Internet, microwave ovens, Google Earth, cellphones, and human footprints on the moon - among a myriad of other technological and scientific marvels. In ten thousand years' time, schoolkids will be bored stiff by having to learn about our generation. But many of us privileged to occupy this eyeblink of time seem oblivious to the wonders and hazards of our age.

Despite our fast-changing technology, we are still shackled to the culture of our hunter-gatherer forebears. We live in 200 squabbling nations, speak 700 languages, and worship a bewildering variety of disparate god(s). Barbarity is not so far behind us. On a personal note, my father was killed by a crocodile in Africa's fast-disappearing wilderness; I was privileged to make the first contact with a hitherto unknown tribe in Vanuatu; in New Zealand my self-built rimu house had been tall timber before the first humans ever set eyes on these islands; the garden I planted in hand-hewed forest was on soil that had never before been cultivated. For better or worse, future generations will not experience such things.

But this column is supposed to be about forestry. What pattern does the forestry industry make in this global kaleidoscope? Trees are just another sort of crop, so let's first look at agriculture/horticulture and then move on to fishing.

The food we eat today is the culmination of ten thousand years of intensive farming. It is largely the result of the intelligence and hard work of farmers, from Central America to Iraq to China, and has been based on trial-and-error - not formal science. The modern carrot, cauliflower or corn kernel is a far cry from its wild ancestors, and it is now grown in a totally different way. The correct choice of soil and site, method of establishment, fertiliser, weed control, etc, have all been painfully deduced from generations of quiet observation, recently accelerated by the application of scientific methodology. Plants can now flourish in hydroponic gardens, and genetic engineering promises to incorporate medical, nutritional and growth benefits to future crops. (Although New Zealand, by a combination of misguided nationalistic fervour and mindless atavism will probably miss out on these developments).

And what of the fishing industry? This is a truly incredible phenomenon. An ordinary meal of the working man might include "fish and chips" - in other words wild fish, gathered by an advanced version of the same

techniques our primitive ancestors might have used. In the 21st century, you and I are still partly hunters and gatherers! Visitors from the Northern hemisphere - where they have nearly eliminated their resource of wild fish stocks - are often surprised at the availability and cheapness of ours. Our great-grandchildren will be truly astounded. Fish provides the major protein source for many countries, but even fish-farms still depend on wild food obtained from the sea. Massive future protein deprivation is inevitable.

And forestry? Most people still gather their wood from the wild forests rather than from tree-farms. Many countries are learning how to manage natural forests (analogous to the way early humans, like packs of wolves, managed herds of horses or antelope, culling the weak or old). A tiny few, like New Zealand, are attempting to farm trees in the same way as wheat. Unfortunately, agriculture has a 10,000 year start on forestry, so we have a long way to catch up.

A most interesting social phenomenon is the groundswell of opposition to changing food-gathering practices. Despite the fact that intelligent development of agriculture and forestry has the best chance of delaying the population crunch, people yearn for the old ways of doing things. "Organic farming", including the avoidance of "artificial" fertilisers, is seen as somehow morally superior, ignoring the fact that - as a major food exporter - New Zealand loses vast quantities of nutrients which must be somehow replaced to avoid mining the soil.

It's a similar situation in forestry - people hark back to a nostalgic and (mythical) past. A recent entry on NZWood's internet forum asks "I would like to use sustainable wood for our building project, and timber from managed forests is out of the question." If the world were to be restricted to timber from unmanaged forests, wood would be even less sustainable, and the human race would collapse even earlier than otherwise. But why limit the discussion to forests? Why not insist on wild fruit and vegetables? Perhaps the nationalism that demands the planting of native trees should also specify wekas instead of chickens, seals instead of beef and cattle, and cabbage trees instead of cabbages?

When those schoolkids look back on us in 10,000 years' time, one nagging question will occur to them: why, given a finite world, did the obviously bright people of the 21st century continue to believe in that mathematical impossibility, "sustainable growth"?



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