At Home In The World
By Peter Abbott


"The most memorable heritage of the twenty first century will be the Age of Loneliness that lies before humanity." In the midst of E.O Wilson’s long and beautiful eulogy to the literally inestimable diversity of natural life on this planet, his words are arresting. The human species is so used to considering itself set apart from the environment that it inhabits — indeed our very identity as a species is defined as not being a species at all in any real sense, but rather as a sanctified angelic race different not just in degree from animals but different in kind.

But "humanity did not descend as angelic beings into this world," Wilson argues. "We evolved here, one among many species, across millions of years, and exist as one organic miracle linked to others. The natural environment we treat with such unnecessary ignorance and recklessness was our cradle and nursery, our school, and remains our one and only home."

In July, a study by the World Wildlife Fund gave that home another half-century to live.

The past thirty years have seen the rape of our planet proceed unchecked and even unnoticed. Since 1970 more than a third of the natural world has been destroyed. In the past three decades North Atlantic stocks of cod have collapsed from an estimated 264,000 tonnes to less than 60,000 today; in the UK the population of the diminutive corn bunting has declined 92%; the tree sparrow 90% and the spotted fly-catcher 70%; the black rhino has seen its numbers fall from 65,000 thirty years ago to around 3,000 today. The world’s population of tigers has dropped by an astonishing 95% over the course of the twentieth century, and the numbers of African elephants have dropped from over 1.2 million in 1980 to under half a million now. The biodiversity of the world’s oceans has been reduced by over one third. Plant and animal species are disappearing a hundred times faster than before the arrival of humanity, and as many as half may be gone by the end of the twenty-first century.

It is not just species that are disappearing. Fresh-water ecosystems have been eroded by over 50% in the past thirty years; global forest cover has shrunk by 12%. Soil is being lost at a rate of 24 billion tons per year including, since 1945, an amount of equivalent to an area the size of India. Ground-level ozone is depleting crops by 5 to 10% a year worldwide.

Although The Future of Life is optimistic about the chances for recovery -- Wilson has more faith in humanity than the evidence seems to warrant -- he nevertheless sees clearly the to the heart of the challenge that faces mankind. "The biospheric membrane," he writes, "is the miracle we have been given. And our tragedy, because a large part of it is being lost forever before we learn what it is and the best means by which it can be savoured and used."

And used it has been. Mankind’s inexhaustible lust for consumption has doubled since 1970 and continues to accelerate by 1.5% a year. Which may not seem like a phenomenal growth rate,
The impact that unchecked corporate greed has on its subjects is also less measurable, akin to “soft-power,” the euphemism used by political grandees to grey up the black-and-white fact that America has become a colonial power, with far more global reach and power than the colonial power it overthrew in the eighteenth century. But, whereas Great Britain ruled their empire by military might, America rules its empire with corporate greed (and a little bit of military might, as well).

Because of corporate influence, it is the assets of companies, rather than the assets of nations, that are measured and discussed. What is not discussed, at least amongst the giddy cheerleaders of capitalism, is the fact that the 200 richest corporations command resources equal to the combined wealth of the poorest 80% of the world’s population. Or the fact that the assets of the world’s three richest people exceed the combined GNP of all least-developed countries and their 600 million people. Or the fact that, according to the United Nations, the income differential between the world’s wealthiest and poorest 20% was 30:1 in 1960, 60:1 in 1990 and 74:1 in 1995.

According to Fox, “poverty is not a certain amount of goods, nor is it just a relation between means and ends; above all it is a relation between people.” What he says makes perfect sense. If you live in a community in which every single person makes, say, $5 an hour there will be no such thing as poverty. The same goes if everyone in that community made only $2 an hour. There is, however, one caveat. You would not be allowed to know of any other community that might be making more than you are. Once that level of knowledge has been breached, poverty exists. Of course there is a standard of living below which no human should fall, but Fox’s point still holds: poverty is more about relations between people than about relations between people and their money. And the state of such relationships has serious consequences. A key determinant of average life expectancy, it turns out, is the difference in income between the rich and the poor in any given community.

Extrapolate the word “community” to embrace the whole world, throw in television, newspapers and the internet and you have a clear recipe for catastrophe.

Manuel Castells, professor of sociology and planning at Berkeley, is, if the Los Angeles Times is to be believed, the “Voltaire of the Information Age.” His vast, sprawling trilogy The Information Age is one of the most comprehensive attempts to understand the new “network society” that the West (and, increasingly, the rest of the world) has come to inhabit. Capra draws convincing parallels between Castell’s social model and the way in which, at the biological level, network theory can be used to understand cellular behaviour.

Capra writes that “in recent years, biologists and ecologists have begun to shift their metaphors from hierarchies to networks and have come to realise that partnership – the tendency to associate, establish links, cooperate, and maintain symbiotic relationships – is one of the hall marks of life.” “The
Much of this is already happening at the heart of what our omnipresent, sound-bite-obsessed media have termed the “anti-globalisation movement.” Activist Susan George believes that it’s time the movement had a different name -- something that would encompass the vast gamut of interests and concerns that are currently all labelled as being “anti-globalisation” -- and suggests the Global Justice Movement. Part of the reason that it needed renaming is that it almost always operates and survives using the tools of globalisation, the fruit of the new, “network society,” and so cannot always be labelled as being “anti.” First and foremost amongst these tools is the internet, frequently cited as the primary way in which protestors from all across the world coordinate themselves and others in effectively, and cheaply, bringing about their goals.

One of their myriad of goals -- and perhaps the one which brought about the “anti-globalisation” tag -- is the one which targets the abysmal working conditions that millions of second and third world citizens find themselves labouring under, all in the name of increasing profits for corporate giants such as the Gap, Nike, K-Mart and Starbucks. But, as Fox points out, the working conditions of the average, suburban American need perhaps just as much radical rethinking.

For him, “there can be no joy in living without joy in work.” Work is not only the means by which we feed ourselves and our families -- although that is an undeniably important aspect of it -- but also “a metaphor and symbol for what we cherish.” Work, for Fox, is much more than just a job, a word Dr. Johnson defined as “petty, piddling work; a piece of chance work.” It is nothing less than an expression of who we believe ourselves to be. Yet work is so very rarely like that for so many, and the damage to the human spirit that results so great.

But what can be done when entire industries with budgets larger than most Third World countries are predicated on keeping as many people in “jobs” (as opposed to work) as possible? The gigantic American advertising business takes its entire purpose from understanding that the American economy is founded not on satisfying needs, but on satisfying wants. Fox asks: “Is [the purpose of advertising] not to pump up the wants of those who have extra means? And does this economy not then oppress those whose true needs are not yet met?” Yes, and yes. But the problem goes further than mere advertising. “It cannot be denied,” EF Schumacher pointedly observes, “that industrialism, certainly in its capitalist form, openly employs [greed, envy and avarice] -- at least three of the seven deadly sins -- as its very motive force.”

Fox believes that this kind of culture outlaws what he calls “spirit” and, in doing so, invites addictions, “addictions that hide the cosmic loneliness people feel, addictions that derive from immature efforts to find Spirit.” Because of the encouragement we get from our governments and our media, from the entire fabric of society, to be greedy, to be envious and to be avaricious, what hope can there ever be to find Fox’s “Spirit?” Theodore Roszak highlights the insidious way in which we are forced to give in to this endless cycle: “Our complex global economy is built upon millions of small, private acts of psychological surrender, the willingness of people to acquiesce in playing
curiously, as proof positive that we will forge a future brighter than the present. “A civilisation able to envision God,” he concludes in his final words, “will surely find the way to save the integrity of this planet and the magnificent life it harbours.”

Then we will truly be at home in the world.