

I Apologize!!

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On this Father's Day 2019, I renew the fact that I GET IT!!

For my professional life, I have been a research social scientist focused on the study of the traditional arts, ritual, and religious behavior. The effort to understand these dimensions of human activity has raised the most fundamental issues about humanity, human mental competence, and the nature of reality. While I have been involved in this primary pursuit, I have also been active in the area of resource conservation and environmentalism from the 1980s – stimulated by my concerns for the small community and my wife, Inger's, professional ecological interests. In 1978, Lester Brown of the Worldwatch Institute explicated the collective threat posed by modern human activities to the global environment in his book, The Twenty Ninth Day. I got the general message, but over the years as my activist efforts narrowed to deal with more local concerns, I failed to sustain the larger core perspective: too many humans – especially given the lifestyle of people in “developed” and developing nations – placing an unsustainable demand on essential natural resources and damaging the overall ecology of the planet.

For a long time, I have recognized the challenge posed to complex society by the human competitive – Me First – “instinct;” but I have seen this issue largely in terms of its negative effect on the ability of humans to cooperate at the national and international levels. I was aware of, but did not really appreciate, the responsibility that developed nations have for the negative ecological impact at the global level of this Me First perspective. I have struggled with the Forest Service through the 1990s in the West to get a landscape/watershed/restoration point of view adopted as the prevailing management perspective, I have written the Forest Management Guide for private landowners in my two surrounding counties, which are the size of the two states of Maryland and Delaware combined. And I led an effort to promote basic ecological awareness in the public school curriculum and “after school” programs of the Upper Klamath Basin. More recently, I have fought a) entrenched grazing interests to protect the fen habitat of the Oregon Spotted Frog and b) the fossil fuel industry to deny a natural gas pipeline and liquefied natural gas facility in southern Oregon.

In my profession, I am a big picture thinker, but I now realize that I have not sufficiently appreciated the critical significance of the ecological challenges humanity faces at the global scale. Most importantly, I have conveniently

overlooked the role developed and developing countries have played in bringing the Anthropocene era to the edge of the ecological abyss. And, in spite of my conservation concerns through the years, I now realize that as an American consumer I have all the while been a relatively full participant in creating this MESS! While I have fought to sustain the habitat of endangered frogs, I have also developed a residential subdivision and renovated and built out five residential properties. Yes, I engaged in these developments responsibly in terms of building codes, renewable energy, and the use of recycled materials.

But I lost sight of the big, big picture combination of the most significant variables: 1) enormous inequality in standard of living among nations at the global level: relative energy use, consumption of resources, contribution to pollution, 2) human population at 7.7 billion and still rising, 3) damaged and depleted planetary ecology and resources: pollution, climate change, species extinction. I failed to sustain a view of my activities through this multiplex lens which reveals a totally unsustainable condition, especially for developed nations. Achieving equality in a global standard of living for 7.7 billion humans while operating within the sustainable limits of the planet's ecology would mean that "advanced" nations would have to greatly reduce their living/consumption standards. I developed multiple properties way beyond this limit. In terms of the big global picture, that was absolutely irresponsible. Unfortunately, I am afraid that my failure is all too common: ecological concerns expressed beneath a cozy umbrella of unsustainable national consumption and life style expectations.

I lost it; and,

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For those who are open to a wake up call, I suggest the following books:

*Bill McKibben, Falter: Has the Human Game Begun to Play Itself Out? New York, 2019. [*If you read only one book, read this one!]

David Wallace-Wells, Uninhabitable Earth: Life After Warming, New York, 2019.

Lester R. Brown, World on the Edge: How to Prevent Environmental and Economic Collapse, Earth Policy Institute, New York, 2011.

Jared Diamond, Upheaval: Turning Points for Nations in Crisis, New York, 2019.
Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed, New York, 2011.

Joseph Stiglitz, People, Power and Profits: Progressive Capitalism for an Age of Discontent, New York, 2019.