

The Wild Hope of an Alternative to Economics as Usual

Susan (Suez) Jacobson
Regis University

Our current economic system, where growth is the answer to every problem, insures a bleak future not only for the natural world but for the human psyche. Using the work of philosophers, scientists, poets, and economists, this paper outlines how our biological connection to awe-inducing wild landscapes might help us reject a society defined by consumption and create a more sustainable and rewarding economic system.

INTRODUCTION

“I feel the possibility of a frugal and protective love for creation that would be unimaginably more meaningful and joyful than our present destructive and wasteful economy” (p. 771). Wendell Berry qtd. in Finch and Elder (1990)

Every politician will tell you, “It’s the economy.” For once, they’re right. It is the economy. But the problem is economics as usual, a bankrupt system of wanting ever more, supported by a paradigm where economic growth is the answer to every economic problem, despite the obvious limits on planetary resources and the failure of more to actually be better. Tim Jackson, a British economist, remarks in his TED talk, “We are either trashing the planet or crashing the system.” A system based on an unsustainable paradigm that demands economic growth driven by consumer spending is not sustainable. In addition, psychologists have reams of data to show that the continued quest for status in a material world does not satisfy human needs, let alone the needs of the biotic community currently under siege. After years of study on the relationship between materialism and happiness, Dr. Tim Kasser, professor of psychology at Knox College, tells us simply that “the more the people say that it's really important to make a lot of money ...the less satisfied they are with their lives” (interview, “Wild Hope,” wildhopefilm.com). Bill McKibben, (2007) environmentalist, activist, and author, reminds us that the percent of people in the US who considered themselves “very happy” peaked in the 1950s when our material well-being was about one third what it is today (p.35). We need a new system, a new economics, an alternative to the dead end of an acquisitive economy based on ever increasing consumption. This paper outlines the problems with economics as usual and then discusses how wild landscapes might provide the “awe” necessary to reframe our economic and social paradigms.

LIMITS

In an economy based on the assumption that invested capital must earn a return, the logical conclusion is that the economy must grow at an exponential rate. But in a world of finite resources, exponential growth defies logic. This idea that we live on a finite planet where growth must logically be restrained is not new. *Limits to Growth*, published in 1972, sold more than 12 million copies. Reflecting

the views of thirty people gathered in Rome “to discuss a subject of staggering scope—the present and future predicament of man” (p. 9), the report stated the obvious, “...physical resources ... are the ultimate determinants of the limits to growth on this earth” (p. 45). The authors also clearly warned of the severity of the “degradation of the environment” (p.10), and hoped their work would ... “encourage each reader to think through the consequences of continuing to equate growth with progress” (p. 12). We’ve made little progress, despite lots of economic growth. As Parenti (2012) writes, “It is worth revisiting *Limits* today because, more than any other book, it introduced the concept of anthropocentric climate change to a mass audience” (p. 24), and yet the audience hasn’t made the fundamental changes necessary to address the problems of the Anthropocene. At the time, the authors of *Limits to Growth* offered four general conclusions about “pollution: 1) It was growing exponentially. 2) We didn’t know the ultimate carrying capacity of the environment. 3) We would probably overestimate the amount of pollution that’s tolerable. 4) Pollution is a global problem – impacts occur vast distances from the source (p. 71).

Today, we know, that all four assertions were prescient. Though we are still not certain of the earth’s ultimate “carrying capacity,” we have gone beyond the 350 parts per million level that scientists tell us is “safe.” Again, to quote Parenti (2012) “...we are finishing another year full of indications that the economy and nature are badly out of balance: summer Arctic sea ice shrank to its smallest-ever recorded area; heat-trapping atmospheric concentrations of carbon dioxide have reached an alarming 400 parts per million;...” (p. 24). In addition, we have been faced with the messiness of global negotiations, that until COP 21, were completely intractable and are now complicated by the recent Supreme Court decision on the EPA’s Clean Power Plan. Today, the assertion of *Limits to Growth* comes back to haunt us: “Taking no action to solve these problems is equivalent to taking strong action. Every day of continued exponential growth brings the world system closer to the ultimate limits to that growth” (p. 183).

We have taken little action and for the most part the writers’ hope that we would reconsider economic growth is unrealized. Rather, mainstream economists and even environmentalists have turned to technology as their hope. Witness Al Gore’s recent optimistic TED talk in which, on the basis of the growth in renewable energy he asserts, “We are going to win this.” Sadly, Gore doesn’t mention any fundamental changes to the way our economy runs. The authors of *Limits to Growth* (1972) expected this:

“Since the recent history of a large part of human society has been so continuously successful, it is quite natural that many people expect technological breakthroughs to go on raising physical ceilings indefinitely. These people speak about the future with resounding technological optimism” (p. 129).

Today, Tim Jackson (2009) questions the optimism that technology is the answer asserting that even with a modest 2% growth, by 2100 we would have to have a “complete de-carbonization of the economy” (p. 81). *Limits to Growth* also reminds us, “We have shown that in the world model the application of technology to apparent problems of resource depletion or pollution or food shortage has no impact on the essential problem, which is exponential growth in a finite and complex system” (p. 137). In addition the authors warn “no new technology is spontaneous or without cost” (p. 54). There is no free lunch. Natural gas was touted as a solution, a bridge. Then we learned the truth. The methane leaking at gas wells made natural gas as dirty, if not dirtier than coal. Now solar is the darling. But solar too has its costs. One of those costs is the death of wildlife, and some of those we are killing are on the endangered species list.

More importantly, calculations and technological solutions miss the point. Underlying this optimism about man’s cleverness is the assumption that if it’s ecologically possible continued economic growth is a laudable goal. But is it? Lisi Krall, an economist at SUNY Cortland, spells it out this way: “We fail to confront what is true: that our present economic system cannot be reconciled with a reverence for the wild impulse of the Earth ...” (“Wild Hope” interview). The next section challenges the growth-is-good paradigm using research in psychology.

PSYCHOLOGICAL HEALTH AND MATERIALISM

The idea that material prosperity has its limits in terms of psychological well-being, is, of course an idea that is even older than *Limits to Growth*. Aristotle, for whom “happiness” (eudaimon) was the ultimate end, defined happiness as a life dominated by virtuous action, a far different idea than what we

see in our materialistic culture. (Cashen, 2012, p. 1). Adam Smith, who is often referred to as the “father of modern economics” and is most often cited for his story of how self-interest is harmonized in markets as though by an “invisible hand” also clearly understood that materialistic aims were not the key to happiness. In 1759, in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* he wrote:

“The great source of both the misery and disorders of human life seems to arise from over-rating the difference between one permanent situation and another. Avarice over-rates the difference between poverty and riches: ambition, that between a private and a public station: vain-glory, that between obscurity and extensive reputation. The person under the influence of any of those extravagant passions, is not only miserable in his actual situation, but is often disposed to disturb the peace of society, in order to arrive at that which he so foolishly admires” (III.1.73).

This passage clearly indicates that Adam Smith believed that avarice or a desire for wealth, ambition or a desire for achievement, and / or vainglory or pride in one’s accomplishments cause people to misjudge the value of what a good life is – to strive foolishly for riches, public station, and an extensive reputation all to the detriment of the society and individual happiness. Adam Smith is not the father of “greed is good.” As John Ehrenfeld, (2013) who ran MIT’s Program on Technology, Business and Environment, has written, “It is all but forgotten that Smith’s model of human behavior was based on empathy, not greed or self-interest” (p. 41).

In our modern world, we don’t hear economists discussing the “misery and disorders” that arise from “avarice.” But recent research by psychologists, grounded in data analysis, tells us what Adam Smith knew – a focus on material well-being and status does not produce the desired results either for the individual or for a society. Bill McKibben (2008) writes, “...new research from many quarters has started to show that even when [economic] growth does make us wealthier, the greater wealth no longer makes us happy.” (p. 2).

But we live in a “hyper-individualistic” consumer society where materialism reigns. Think about the Apple ad a few years ago featuring a father and a young child with an i-Pad that asked consumers to “consider the experience of a product.” This is a stark example of our society’s preoccupation with possessions rather than relationships with each other and with the natural world. Sadly, this preoccupation leads us down the wrong path. Richins and Dawson (1992), marketing professors at the University of Missouri and Portland State respectively, report that materialistic people are acquisitive, self-centered, less satisfied with life, and are less concerned about the environment. And there’s a vast literature that finds results similar to Richins’ and Dawson’s. Tim Kasser reports extensive research in *The High Price of Materialism* (2002) to support the claim that “... materialistic values undermine our quality of life” (p. 97). Tim Jackson startles us into thinking about the dead end of our materialistic pursuits in his TED talk by saying, “We spend money we don’t have, to buy things we don’t need, to make impressions that won’t last on people we don’t care about” (“An economic reality check”).

Focus on material well-being is a recipe for individual unhappiness that bleeds beyond the individual to the community. Economists often argue that economics is amoral – it’s simply the study of utility maximizing consumers interacting in arms-length transactions with profit maximizing businesses. This paradigm, though it has never been completely accurate, is now dangerous in a world where climate change threatens the natural balance of the planet. Every choice is a moral choice, and the natural world can no longer support growth economies in the developed world. Pope Francis in his recent encyclical, *Laudato Si’*, quotes Benedict XVI, writing, “Purchasing is always a moral – not simply economic – act” (para. 206). In *Limits to Growth* the authors wrote, “The conclusions of the study point to the need for fundamental change in the values of society” (p. 189). Kuo (2012) reminds us, “In the end, prosperity resides in our ability to flourish as human beings—within the ecological limits of our finite planet” (p. 18). But what might reorder the paradigm, demanding that we recognize the moral dimensions of our economic choices?

One insight into why materialism is not the answer and what might be is the recognition that humans are fundamentally biological creatures with an affinity for the natural world. Anyone who has been in a wild landscape or looked into a deep night sky simply feels the awe of connection. The next section considers the power of wild landscapes to change the way we think about the world and our place in it.

WILD THINKING

In 1972, in *Only One Earth, An Unofficial Report Commissioned by the Secretary General of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment*, contributors argued for “a complete transformation of the political structures or of life-styles,” for a “new socioeconomic morality,” and for “cultivation of spiritual values” (p. xv). This is a call for a deep and structural change that science and personal experience suggest may be sparked by awe produced by connections to the natural world. Jake Abrahamson (2014) reports, “Awe prompts people to redirect concern away from self and toward everything else. And about three quarters of the time, it’s elicited by nature.”

Biology provides a foundation for these views. Writing in 1984, Harvard Professor, E.O. Wilson, best known for his ant science, argued in *Biophilia* that we, as humans, have biological connections to the natural world beyond the human realm, and that this scientific reality demands from us “moral reasoning of a new and more powerful kind” (p. 138). Stephen Kellert (2008), a chaired professor at Yale’s School of Forestry and Environmental Studies writes, “*Biophilia* is manifest in a range of genetically encoded tendencies to attach meaning to and derive benefit from, in effect value, the natural world” (p. 462). Kellert cites several studies validating the claims that exposure to the natural world reduces stress, improves mental abilities, hastens healing after surgery, and can change lives, especially for youth engaged in immersion experiences with their peers. For example, in one study patients who had undergone gall bladder surgery recovered faster if they could see trees from the windows in their rooms rather than brick walls. In another study, college students who walked in a park for 40 minutes performed better on a complex proofreading task than other students who had walked in urban settings or who sat indoors listening to music and reading (p. 463).

More psychological research into the science of awe, corroborates the power of the natural world. Keltner and Haidt (2003) tell us, “Fleeting and rare, experiences of awe can change the course of a life in profound and permanent ways” (p. 297). Writing in the *Handbook of Positive Emotions* (2014), Shiota, Thrash, Danvers, and Dombrowski (2014) tell us that awe, along with inspiration and elevation, is a positive emotion that unlike other positive emotions (even gratitude) turns our attention away from ourselves to the other. Reviewing studies, they report that awe challenges “our expectations about what is and can be” diverting attention “outside the self toward something to be understood and appreciated” – “something greater than self, inviting us to transcend our day-to-day agendas and limits” (p. 363). Awe requires what they label “cognitive accommodation” that results in “updating one’s world view” (p. 363). Importantly they also report that one of the easiest awes is the awe elicited by vast landscapes.

Although this research on awe is relatively new, the studies that demonstrate the power of this emotion to suppress the fundamentally selfish behavior of utility maximizing homo economicus is impressive. Awe makes us feel “that the self is small or insignificant, sensing something greater than the self” and being “connected with the surrounding world” (Shiota et al., 2014, p. 364). The results also suggest that awe can help us to think differently, lessening “reliance of previously held schemas ... in processing new knowledge” (Shiota et al., 2014, p. 366). Powerfully, awe also “mediated ... self-reported willingness to volunteer time to help others, preference for experiences rather than material objects, and life satisfaction” (Shiota et al., 2014, p. 366). Awe not only produces changes in thinking, but in behavior as well.

The rigor of academics demands data and peer reviewed studies. But personal stories speak to our souls; they make real the awe, the spiritual experiences, the challenges to our ethics, and the experience of seeing our place in a bigger universe. They tell us about finding the humility to use our voices to protect what has no say, about realigning our values. Where else will we go where we can see so starkly that materialism does not satisfy planetary needs, that it’s time for a dramatic change?

Hiking in the James Peak Wilderness, I asked a five-year old boy with his grandfather, “Why are you hiking?” He replied, “It was my dream to hike.” Dreams are powerful – to dream to hike reflects a fundamental connection at this very young age when the connection is not intellectual. Another hiker, a 20-something woman, answered the question in the vernacular of her demographic, “To get connected.” Both responses indicate the depth of the experience of the wild.

John Muir, perhaps the most powerful voice for the wild, argued that “In God’s wildness lies the hope of the world” (Muir qtd.in Highland, 2001, p.315). For Muir the wilderness was the holiest of temples. Even the answer to perhaps the biggest challenge to the human mind, to which religion provides a palliative answer, one’s inevitable death, Muir found in a simple lesson from Nature,

“But let children talk with Nature, let them see the beautiful blendings of communications of death and life, their joyous inseparable unity, as taught in woods and meadows, plains and mountains and streams of our blessed star, and they will learn that the grave has no victory, for it never fights. All is divine harmony” (Muir qtd. in Teale, 1954, p. 90).

Renny Russel, writing about dealing with the death of his brother Jerry years before when they were running the Green River together as young men, put it this way:

“In reconciling death, some find comfort in reincarnation or astrology. Others turn to Christ, to Buddha, to Krishnamurti. Some turn to the stoic philosophers for peace, while others just turn away, or turn on, or take an aspirin. Solace is where you find it. I have found it by returning to the wilderness and in the austere immensity of the universe where galaxies dance, where questions are asked, and answers are given that are not always easily interpreted. I invariably seek out a star brighter than the rest, the ineffable light of my brother’s spirit that had been my guide” (p.188).

My students, whom I take hiking and on service projects, also tell stories of the power of wild landscapes. Scott Brown, a business major, wrote in a reflection about his participation in a seed collection for Wildlands Restoration Volunteers,

“The general public lives a life of stress, shackled by text messages and traffic lights. ... The day that I spent near the Boulder foothills reminded me that our plural spirits need more than what we tend to give them. Companies lead us to believe that we need the newest iPhone, that we need the biggest television, but we don’t. What we need is appreciation.”

Here’s another story, the story of Cesar Robles, a computer science major who had never been to the wilderness.

“The simple response that I have for why I’d never gone hiking in the wilderness is that my background is that of a ‘First-Generation American’ whose parents both came from Mexico where the idea of wilderness preservation is almost non-existent. In fact, this reality really hit home when I told my parents I was going hiking and they had no idea what the word ‘hike’ meant. I tried to translate it to Spanish and their first reaction was one of fear and shock as they pictured me doing a climbing expedition similar to Mt. Everest climbing expeditions seen on TV.”

After his “hike” Robles, in his reflection used this quote from Lane’s (1998) *Solace of A Fierce Landscape* to frame his experience: “Mountain and desert people do not talk much...the desert and mountain terrain redefines every boundary giving shape to one’s life” (p. 39). Robles wrote:

“The first part of this quote made me think back about how during the hike we all seemed to be more focused on the hike itself rather than on conversing with one another. I also was able to relate to it because during the lunch break that we took atop the hiking trail I was fairly quiet during the group conversation but really just enjoyed being there.”

Then he reflected on the redefinition of the boundaries shaping his life.

“The second part of the quote again made me relate the way that exercise is meant to shape you up and the way that just being in a fierce wilderness mountain terrain can also shape you physically, mentally and spiritually.”

Wilderness has the power to change boundaries. Wild landscapes force us to question the status quo, a status quo that has dimmed the lights in our spiritual cores and brought us to the emergency of climate change fundamentally caused by the idea that economic growth is the answer to economic problems. Margaret Thatcher famously said, “There is no alternative.” But there has to be. Awe transforms. The awe of vast wilderness landscapes produces reverence, humility, and love for our larger biotic community. We see that we are more than homo economicus, more than rational economic consumers. George Monbiot, syndicated columnist at the *Guardian*, tells us that “wilderness activates ...a whole different set of ideas about what’s important,” reminding us that we are biological beings, spiritually embedded in a wild natural world, not an economic system (Interview for “Wild Hope”).

Terry Tempest Williams (2001), a prolific and powerful writer and advocate for wilderness calls on our collective conscience:

“The eyes of the future are looking back at us and they are praying for us to see beyond our own time. They are kneeling with hands clasped that we might act with restraint, that we might leave room for that life that is destined to come.” (p. 229).

And Jeanette Armstrong, an Okanagan author, educator, artist and activist reminds us: “Society changes when transformative experiences are made available.”

We need wilderness for biological reasons. But we also need it to awe us into being the change in a world that can no longer thrive under an economic system based on ever more consumption. Wilderness is a powerful tool to remind us of a larger whole, a reality where “more is better” doesn’t fit as an organizing principle. A reality where we are small and humbled and part of something we might lose if we allow our unrestrained arrogance and greed to be the wild in us.

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