

The creative wilderness¹

By Thor Heyerdahl²

Why do we call our environment a wilderness? Civilized man has too little time to think, especially about the distant past and the distant future. We lose the perspective and go wild within our own civilization, unless we think of what the wilderness were to our ancestors and what the mega-cities will be for our descendants.

Man, as a species, has lived within the ecosystem of this planet for an estimated two million years. We shall never know when our ancestors began to call our ecosystem a wilderness. But we do know that ever since the first known civilizations began to grow and spread from Mesopotamia, Egypt, and the Indus Valley about five thousand years ago, man has waged a deliberate war against his environment. Not the so-called primitive peoples, they live in harmony with what we call the wilderness. The more civilized we become. The more invent, produce, and consume, the less we understand of the wilderness, and the more we triumph of our ability to win the war against nature. And the more bewildered we become as to what kind of man-made world we are about to build. Until very recently, until the last few decades, we have taken it for granted that every step away from nature is a step in the right direction, and we call it progress. Speed and comfort are our status symbols for progress. The faster we travel the more, we become stressed. The more we tell each other that time is money, the less we have of it. We have in fact ended up struggling more than any previous generation, and more than any uncivilized people living today. If we take the time to think about it, civilization has basically become a way of complicating simplicity. Something must have gone wrong along the way. It was not the intention of ending up with the life most people on this planet live today when man moved from the forests and fields into the streets. Too many people work under pressure to survive, and too many others get no work at all. Our only comfort is that we can tell ourselves that most of us who still have our daily bread are better off than most people in the dark Mediaeval ages. And probably we right, if we ignore the one third of the population on this planet who starve and suffer in the cities and urban areas on all continents today. But they are as far away from the wilderness as we are who live in abundance at the cost of the others and at the cost of the ecosystems we still share in common.

Those of us who have had the possibility to travel in all continents, and seen the endless number of people in the slums, and perhaps also had the chance to live among people who until the end of the twentieth century live in direct and intimate contact with nature, will best understand that not all steps away from nature are blessing to humanity. Soil and water can still take care of poor families in rural areas, whereas streets and beautiful shop windows have no mercy for those who have no money to go in and buy the cakes and hamburgers on display. We have something to learn from the people we want to civilize only because they lack our technology, because they live in houses with earthen floors and have to milk their goat by hand. We would like them to learn from us and to buy from us. We would like to sell them computers so they could sit and work with fingertips like us. We pity them who still have to use their legs and arms, and we forget that they get less tired by working bodily all day than we get after five minutes morning exercise in a futile attempt at maintaining the sparse muscles we have left.

¹ This essay is based on the keynote speech at the 5th World Wilderness Congress, Tromsø, Norway, sept. 25th, 1993.

² For more information about Thor Heyerdahl: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thor_Heyerdahl

We have invented all sorts of gauges, to measure size, weight, volume and wavelength. But we have no instrument to measure human happiness, and yet happiness is after all what we all strive for. We just take it for granted, for an axiom and indisputable fact, that we must be happier with all our television entertainment and press-button systems than those who have never seen a screw driver or a wire, and never moved faster than on horseback. Nature itself has given man something we can read to find if a person is happy. The expression of the face. The smile. The broader the smile, the happier is the person. And when we really bubble over of enjoyment, we laugh. Walk the streets in an average city, and a thousand people pass by without a smile, as if walking in a dream without seeing you. Paddle into a reed hut settlement among barefoot marsh Arabs, or walk into a village of sun dried mud bricks in an oasis in northern Peru, and every person you look at instantly smiles back. And nowhere do children laugh more or play more merrily than in areas where neither automatic toys nor TV or comic strips have arrived to entertain them. If the smile is a gauge for an outsider to read another person's happiness, or to test our own if we look in a mirror, then there must be something aboriginal people still possess which the rest of us have lost in our eagerness to accumulate material possessions and technological progress.

It is easy to tempt aboriginal people to abandon their own customs and follow us on our road of technological progress. Show any of them a button or a wheel and they will turn on television or drive a car as easily as any of us. And never have we from the so-called developed nations done more to teach other people our way of living than just now, when we are beginning to see the serious flaws in our own civilization and feel ever more uncertain as to whether or not we are on safe course.

Never, until the present generation, have men and women all over the world begun to fear the obvious fact that mankind is now rapidly approaching a total victory over nature. We are, in fact, afraid that we might win. Certainly, give two billion cars to all those on this planet who still have none, and we will be another step closer to victory.

Darwin last century taught his contemporaries to think, and not blindly accept the words of the prophets of the past who preached that man came from Paradise on Earth a number of named generations ago. Today there is an urgent need to follow up Darwin's line of thinking, in the opposite direction, into the future. Are we to trust the modern prophets, the technologists and the politicians, when they promise us that we are heading into a Paradise in the future if we continue to support their leadership and the way they are steering! Will the computer-trained Adam and Eve in the future walk into a better world for mankind than the one our first ancestors woke up in at the end of the creation or evolution! It is enough to eliminate the lions and the crocodiles and replace them with computerized creatures controlled by man, or must we first find a solution to control man, so he does not hang nuclear fruits on the Tree of Knowledge, instead of sweet apples? It is our environment, the plants and animals around us, there is something wrong with? Or is it ourselves?

Since man moved into walled cities in early Antiquity, to protect himself from armies of human enemies, he has lost contact with the forest, and the green world that previously bred him and fed him became to him the dark and dangerous home of lion, bear and wolf. The birthplace and very cradle of our human ancestors became a wilderness, looked upon by man in the cities as something hostile, to be conquered and eliminated as a threat to human species. And since Charles Darwin launched his theory of evolution last century, modern man began to see the shadow of our ancestors behind us as hairy apes, tempting us to rush forward ever

faster in a blind escape. Escape from the green world that has fed us, towards the dream cities of steel, sterile asphalt and plastics that many hope we may build one day on flying platform circling high above the clouds. Perhaps we in our hurry have lost all sense of reality both about the human past and about the human future.

In reality, we know incredibly little about the early human past, and anybody with the slightest knowledge of biology could disprove the idea of the extremists among the technologists, those who argue that if we destroy our environment on this planet, they can help our descendants to survive if we can give the technologists money enough to construct flying platforms in outer space. The myths and fairytales of our forefathers are closer to reality than the dreams of the future modern television and coloured magazines impressed upon our youngsters with their programs of star-wars between flying supermen. With billions of humans lacking a bed to sleep in, how many of our descendants can we pack together on man-made space ships, and who shall pay the bill? Those who must remain on earth?

To move forward in right direction we must at least tell our children to keep their minds unpolluted of such false ideal and futile dreams. Modern pollution is easy to observe in our own environment, but it is also inside ourselves. While science and priesthood discuss evolution versus creation, there is full agreement about the fact that early man grew up in nature. And there is no alternative. All other species lived on this planet, most of them for millions of years, before man appeared, no matter whether he was created or evolved. Or created through evolution.

If nature was as enemy to man, how could mankind have survived the childhood unarmed in nature? Who protected the first untold generations of naked men and women? Nobody in the wilderness was in greater need of being both nursed and protected than the first human beings. Other species were equipped to protect themselves. But man started his subsequent career in the wilderness as helplessly naked as a big frog.

In the course of biological evolution, the vast variety of other and older species had developed horns, tusks, fangs or claws to defend themselves, quills, carapace, or poisonous devices for protection, or they had wings, tails, fins of four legs fit for speed, all designed for fast escape. But not so man. When he started to walk naked and barefoot along the old animal trails looking for his share of available food, any carnivorous feline could run or jump faster than him and tear him and his family to pieces. He could not get away by climbing or by diving into the underbrush because of thorns and snakes. Every niche in the environment was already occupied by specialized species with claws, jaws, tails, hoofs and wings permitting them to prevent the newborn babies, the human family, to get access to food nature had so far produced and provided only for them. Man became as competitor.

But somehow nature found space for man. The animals let Homo sapiens walk in peace and multiply. Food was provided for our earliest ancestors until they became so numerous that they revolted and assaulted their hairy room mates in the green wilderness that so far had nourished and protected them all.

Whether we believe in God or in Darwin, we need some rethinking. We should not be so afraid of the hairy apes being us, but perhaps of the imaginary superman in front of us.