

Things have never been so good for humanity, nor so dire for the planet

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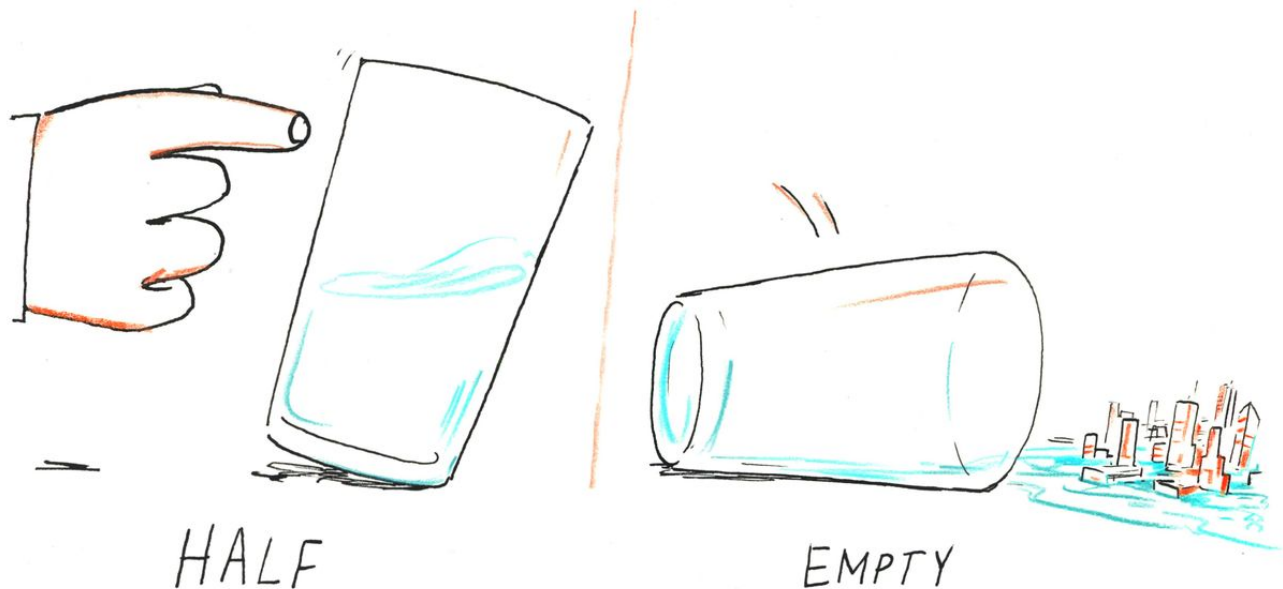


Illustration by Graham Roumieu

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It's that time of year in Vancouver again, when the North Shore mountains drift in and out of sight, our pricey view impeded by the smoke of yet another record-setting wildfire season. Vancouver's not alone – at its height, the haze stretched from here to Winnipeg – nor is it anywhere near the hardest hit. Vancouverites can still see the sun at noon; in fact, we can stare straight at it. But even here, the air-quality index has surpassed the worst possible ranking of 10-plus, forcing infants and asthmatics indoors for days on end.

Contrast that with the best possible ranking Vancouver routinely earns in The Economist's Global Liveability Index, which was released this month. This year, true, our city fell to sixth place, and for the first time we weren't even the best in Canada. That honor fell to Calgary, which came in third, and for a while had more smoke than us, too.

So congratulations, Naheed Nenshi, and welcome to the defining paradox of our time: Things have never been so good for humanity, nor so dire for the planet.

On one side of the ledger, we have everything from women's empowerment and the spread of literacy to modern dentistry, plumbing and the electric light bulb. My wife happens to deliver babies for a living, a realm that offers a profound illustration of historical improvement. The proportion of women and infants who die in childbirth is orders of magnitude less today than a century ago. For those places this trend hasn't yet reached, it's coming; between 2000 and 2015, global maternal mortality dropped another third.

On the other side of the ledger, humanity is busy executing an extermination known as the Sixth Great Extinction. The latest comprehensive study, recently published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, found human civilization has so far wiped out 83 per cent of the world's mammals, half the plants on earth, and 15 per cent of the oceans' fish. Like any genocide, this is both a moral abomination and an existential threat, because the same forces wiping them out will eventually come for us. Put aside the moral part for a moment. Slaughtering the world's pollinating insects isn't a great agricultural strategy. An ocean with more plastic than fish won't be an endless source of protein. Throw in the global depletion of potable freshwater, hypervolatile weather bringing ever more droughts, fires, floods and hurricanes, plus, oh I don't know, rising sea levels set to displace one or two billion coastal inhabitants before the end of the century, and it all becomes – like nothing else but nuclear war – too much to contemplate.

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Has it ever been easier not to? The grocery stores in which I've foraged all my life suggest ever more abundance and diversity. That message, and countless others like it, hits me on a far more visceral level than any communiqué from the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. Today's music is so excellent, the television so intelligent, the wine so complex, that it's harder than ever to feel in our guts the one thing that's truer than ever: Our ecosystems are in mortal danger.

It's like we've turned Noah's Ark into a humans-only party yacht and sailed it to the edge of Niagara Falls. There's a million distractions aboard, but only three options as far as the waterfall goes. You can struggle against all odds to turn the ship around, stare numbly into the abyss or turn your back and dance.

My personal adaptation is to ricochet erratically between all three.



Aug. 21, 2018: Heavy haze conceals Vancouver's skyline as seen from Jericho Beach. Thick smoke from wildfires blanketed the city, triggering warnings about dangerous particulate matter in the air and comparisons with cities in China and India ranked by the WHO as the worst polluted.

DON MACKINNON/AFP/Getty Images

George Monbiot, the renowned British environmental writer, noted recently that one of humanity's greatest weaknesses is our inability to perceive incremental change. Biologists refer to this as the phenomenon of shifting baselines. The term is usually invoked to describe how each generation grows accustomed to a diminished ecosystem, meaning we never realize that we're catching fewer and smaller fish than our parents, or that there's nowhere near as many bugs as there once were; our conception of biological abundance is constantly being downgraded without anyone noticing. But baselines shift upward, too: I can fly to Paris, treat an infection with penicillin or pluck an ice cube from the freezer without any of these things seeming remarkable. The baselines of material progress no longer take anywhere near a generation to shift up, either. It already requires conscious effort to be amazed at what my phone can do.

"Remembering," Mr. Monbiot writes, "is a radical act." I agree. But I'm not arguing for a return to any golden age, ecological or otherwise. The world is awash in radical nostalgia, a delusion that slips all too easily into violence.

If you ask me, the world needs a different kind of radical.



The wretched of the earth, then and now. Left: An 1872 illustration by Gustave Dore shows the London slum of Seven Dials. Right: Volunteers clean a drainage area in a UN-sponsored event at Nairobi's Kibera slum on May 25, 2018.

Photos.com, AFP/Getty Images

I know. There's a caveat in the room.

Were I a coltan miner in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, or a Syrian refugee, or an Indigenous survivor of Canada's residential-school system, I wouldn't be going on about how fabulous life is. There's a terrible danger in praising human progress (oh fraught notion!), one that white men such as myself are embarrassingly prone to: We mistake our good luck and the tireless work of others for personal merit, and promptly forget all about the multitudes who aren't yet in the yacht.

A sub-conundrum, then: Not only are things too good for us to worry about the environment, they're also too bad.

But there's a commensurate danger in dismissing the hard-fought gains of progress: They vanish when taken for granted. We're seeing today how easily everything from racism to measles can creep back into societies from which they'd supposedly been eradicated. The United States has even allowed maternal mortality to start inching back up, from seven deaths per 100,000 in 1990 to more than 25 today. That's tragic; it's also still a hell of a lot better than a hundred years ago, when the number was around 600.

Are there innumerable searing human crises in the world today? Yes. There always have been, along with the moral obligation to alleviate them. What there hasn't always been is an international standard of human rights, motorized transport or democracy. There's never been 7.6 billion humans trying simultaneously to preserve their identity and merge into a prosperous global society. And there has never been the prospect of a global ecological collapse.

So I find myself in the paradoxical position of arguing, in all the wrong places, to all the wrong people, that things have never been better! But we should be worried, very worried!



A 1955 painting by wildlife artist and sportsman Carl Rungius shows caribou north of Jasper. Alberta's energy industry has taken a toll on the province's wildlife, but so has agriculture: You don't see a lot of caribou wandering the fields between Edmonton and Calgary.

It's not like I'm the first to say so. Most famously, Charles Dickens opened *A Tale of Two Cities* with a similar conundrum. More recently and specifically, the concept of an "environmentalist's paradox" gained brief currency in 2010, when *Bioscience* magazine published an article called *Untangling the Environmentalist's Paradox: Why is Human Well-Being Increasing While Ecosystem Services Degrade?* The researchers, led by McGill's Ciara Raudsepp-Hearne, posited four potential answers:

- 1) Maybe humans aren't actually better off, but only think we are.
- 2) Advances in food production outweigh all other considerations.
- 3) Modern technology has reduced our reliance on ecosystem services.
- 4) The worst effects of environmental degradation are yet to come.

I've covered my (debatable, fine) take on the first. On food production, I'm reminded of the biologist I once interviewed about the cumulative impacts of Alberta's energy industry on the province's wildlife. Sure, he said, oil and gas do a lot of damage, but if you want to study an industry that's really devastated the environment, you should be looking at agriculture. There aren't a lot of caribou wandering the fields between Edmonton and Calgary. That leads to the third answer, the one I hear most often, which assumes technology will protect us from the slings and arrows of environmental desolation. Who needs caribou when we've got factories full of pigs and cows? We can seed the clouds, build the dikes, switch to solar when the oil runs out. It's happening already.

But whenever I'm told that technology will save us from the consequences of technology, I think of the Northern cod. After the population suffered a partial collapse in the 1970s, cries of overfishing were ignored – and catches started getting bigger again, not smaller. Improved radar and sonar technology enabled fishing fleets to zero in on the cod's huge remaining schools, scoop them up with total efficiency and point to their rising catch as proof of the population's overall health. So it went until 1992, when suddenly, or so it seemed, the last school was sucked from the sea. In this way, the industry's biggest year was also its last.



Aug. 4, 1997: A fisherman keeps his eye on the cable as he unloads a catch of cod in Newfoundland. Advancing technology helped fishermen to deplete Northern cod stocks so severely that it led to the stock's commercial extinction in 1992.

Which brings us to our final conclusion: The worst is yet to come. We're seeing glimpses of it now, the first of the worst, in the unprecedented cycles of fire and flood now ravaging the planet; in the Great Barrier Reef, reduced to white skeleton; in the Gulf of Mexico's New

Jersey-sized dead zone at the mouth of the Mississippi; in the crashing populations of monarch butterflies and other vanishing species. These things flare up, horrify everyone for a news cycle, then become that most modern phenomenon, the new normal.

That said, Newfoundland's fishermen didn't wink out of existence with the cod. Many of them moved to Fort McMurray and found work in the oil sands. So let's say technology can save us. Let's say we can despoil the earth and still enjoy our human rights to steady jobs and craft beer and free childhood education, until the sun blows up. That would take care of the existential crisis, all right.

Less so the moral abomination.



July 24, 2018: A baby orca whale is being pushed by her mother after being born off the B.C. coast near Victoria. The baby died soon after being born, and the mother carried it above the surface of the water for more than two weeks.

David Ellifrit/The Canadian Press

Around the time my province was catching fire, a tragedy unfolded in the waters to my west. It began when a killer whale gave birth to a calf that died half an hour later. Overcome by grief, the mother refused to let her baby go and instead carried it with her, raising the body above the surface so it could breathe, over and over again, for 17 days.

Seventeen days. The story made global headlines, which is its sole redeeming aspect. It demonstrates not just how deeply non-humans can grieve, but how deeply humans can empathize with another species' suffering. I'd like to think we can't not empathize, if only we're made aware.

For much of human history, slavery was endemic to every continent. We denied women the vote, if there was one. We beat our children. We deployed casual, violent slurs against ethnic or religious or sexually oriented others, and marginalized them to death. Slowly, fitfully, with all kinds of backsliding and failures of principle and mountains yet to climb, this is changing. Humanity is learning to see itself in the other, to feel that other's pain.

This expansion of empathy has begun to spread beyond our own species. We don't beat our dogs, we no longer trap wild orcas to be trained at SeaWorld. But that journey's just begun. Humans didn't kill that baby orca directly, but we are very much the reason why the Southern Resident population it was born into is on the brink of extirpation, down to 75 individuals. Hounded by overfishing and whale-watchers and climate change and a degree of acoustic agony no human can fully comprehend, the Southern Residents haven't had a successful new birth since 2015.

Will we ease their misery? Will we implement the sweeping policy changes required to keep orcas from disappearing forever from these waters? If so, can we then keep growing our moral sphere to include not just charismatic megafauna, but fish, too, and reptiles, and birds, and insects? If you think that's radical, plants are next. The further you go, the crazier it seems, but none of this ends until we've wrapped the very lakes and mountains in our embrace.

Because this is where the paradox unravels, becomes a single linear truth: The same suppression of empathy that's allowed humans to destroy one another throughout history is what allows us to ravage our biosphere.

The good news is it doesn't have to be this way. We now acknowledge, in words and intention if not always in deed, that it's wrong for one human to oppress another. Some countries – New Zealand, Bolivia, Ecuador – have even begun enshrining the rights of nature in their constitutions.

Beneath every great fortune lies a hidden crime. Here in Canada, our Truth and Reconciliation process is excavating one such crime, forcing us settlers to confront the dark origins of our land wealth. It's a moral awakening, a further expansion of our sphere of empathy – centuries late and excruciatingly slow, but it's happening.

But those orcas, those caribou, those cod? For now, they're just a bunch of animals.