

Trumpeter (1994)  
ISSN: 0832-6193  
THE TURNAROUND DECADE

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The decade of the 1990s has been called the turnaround decade. Many studies show that the decisions we make in this decade will be the most important in the history of civilization — not just Western civilization but all civilization, as historians have described it over the past two and a half thousand years. The environmental crisis is now recognized as affecting every continent on the planet and all the oceans of this planet, as well as the atmosphere.

In his perceptive essay on the greenhouse effect, Bill McKibben suggests we are witnessing the "end of nature". By that he means we are witnessing the end of our ideas about nature and about time. Life on this planet may have begun over four billion years ago. Our ideas about nature were formed only during the last four hundred years. Our comforting thoughts that the Earth is very large and will absorb the wastes of our civilization began to crumble when we discovered how long it will take for the radioactive particles scientists formed during the last forty years to decay into a less harmful state of being. Within four decades we have increased the rate of extinction of nonhuman lifeforms to the point that, at current rates, 30 to 50 percent of all the species on the Earth will become extinct within the next fifty years. As McKibben says, "We have killed off nature — that world entirely independent of us which was here before we arrived and which encircled and supported human society."

The new nature is unpredictable. *Nature* has now become a loaded term — that is, the very words we use to refer to our predicament may be part of the problem. For now it is enough to define nature as the processes that hold the Earth together and the manifestations of those processes in ecological relationships, geological events, formation of landscapes, and changes due to forces not under human control. The old nature had extremes — storms, earthquakes, droughts — but summer followed winter, and over the millennia it was reliable. The old nature was so reliable we didn't have to think about it, and many attempted to avoid thinking about it all together during the Age of Exuberance. Since food came packaged in supermarkets, they didn't even have to think about watering the vegetable garden in their yard. The new nature is so unpredictable that we *must* think about it — daily. The question is: Do we have the will to change our lifestyles drastically enough, quickly enough, and with enough commitment to the new nature to save ourselves as well as fragments of the biodiversity of this planet?

Mikhail Gorbachev, who has been a major participant in changes in his own nation as well as in East-West relationships, commented in 1992. "The truth of the matter is that today all of us, East and West, are moving toward a new type of civilization, whether we realize it or not. And it is that which compels me to think that our old stereotypes have now lost their meaning and should be radically reexamined."

Dr. Mustafa Tolba, director general of the United Nations Environment Program, predicted in his introduction to the *World Conservation Strategy*, that: "Unless nations change their course, we face, by the turn of the century, an environmental catastrophe as complete, as irreversible as any nuclear holocaust."

A new type of civilization is emerging that is different from any seen on Earth during the past ten thousand years. The past half century will be seen by historians of the twenty-second century as a bizarre episode in human history. They may call the past half-century the Age of Exuberance.

What lessons have we learned from our experiences during the Age of Exuberance?

\*We have learned that Bigness is not always better. Bigger human populations do not always produce high-quality civilization nor harmonious relationships among people or between people and the rest of nature.

\*We have learned the dangers of addiction to Consumption for the sake of consumption. What we called a "higher" standard of living has threatened not only the quality of human lives, but the quality of life of the Earth as a whole.

\*We have learned some of the dangers of addiction to growth — economic growth, information growth, growth in the rate of technological change. Economic growth does not always solve social problems and may accentuate social inequality, insecurity, and dislocation from our community. Growth in accumulation of information without a framework to interpret this information can lead to apathy — increasingly people complain of "information overload". Rapid rates of technological change make it increasingly difficult to assess the social and environmental impacts of new technology.

\*We have learned that community is more important for our well-being than society and that our community includes nonhuman nature.

\*Perhaps we have learned that humans, as a species, would be better off taking a more modest position in the flow of energy in the biosphere than attempting always to dominate, control, and fix nature to fit our whims, our desires, our demands for straight lines, for efficient use of water and wood to fuel our industrialized civilization and the growth machine of our economy.

The Age of Exuberance is rapidly coming to a close. *The Age of Ecology* is arriving. Our new perceptions of nature will have only partial similarity to

our old, sentimental perceptions of nature — our love of ancient forests, fuzzy animals, grand vistas, gardening, hiking in designated wilderness areas, taking a vacation at the beach. In industrial civilization, we have abused our relationship with nature, and nothing less than a fundamental change in perception of our place in nature will enable us to make amends.

Are we ready to face up to our addictions? Are we willing to admit that the assumptions we made about prosperity, economic growth, about our need for higher and higher standards of living led us in a vicious cycle to our current predicament? Therapists who deal with addictive behavior suggest that when we face up to our addictions, take the first step in changing our patterns of behavior, we have taken the most important step. Drastic reevaluation of our lifestyle and a conscious decision to change our habits — habits of thought and habits of behavior — may be the most courageous action we can take in this "moment of truth."

The process of greening our lifestyles begins with reduction - - reduction in wastes that are thrown into the environment, reduction in the stuff we surround ourselves with, reduction in the size of our impact on natural processes.

The recovery process, recovering from the habits developed during the Age of Exuberance, will take a long time. How long? Probably the rest of our lives. Recovery of natural systems will take many centuries.

Revitalization will take commitment from individuals in communities and by the society as a whole. It includes revitalizing our sense of place in nature. It includes revitalization of our institutions — churches, finance and savings institutions, schools — to make decisions based on the emerging eco-centric worldview. More than that, it means revitalizing our sense of wonder, our mindfulness of the processes of nature.

Our choices will diminish in the future — perhaps drastically diminish — but if humans have demonstrated anything during their brief appearance as a species of this planet, it is that they are adaptable. Millions of people have already begun to change their habits. The need for recycling and waste reduction is widely accepted. Merchandisers are noting a trend toward downscaling — buying smaller houses, less furniture, appliances that are more energy efficient (that don't use CFCs or other gases that interact with the upper stratosphere to destroy the ozone layer), and smaller vehicles that are kept longer. There is less desire for throw-away products and more concern with quality and durability. More and more people are willing to volunteer to become environmental guardians rather than only give money to environmental organizations.

All these are positive indications that many people accept the need for changing their lifestyles. Making our way, and making peace, in a sometimes intransigent world has many dimensions — spiritual, social, political. As we begin to realize the enormous impacts that industrial civilization has had on this Earth, making

peace with nature becomes a central theme. Greening our lifestyles in the Age of Ecology involves changes in the way we see ourselves and the way we understand our place on the Earth — our place as individuals, as members of the community of humans within which we live, as one species among many dwelling on this Earth.

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**Citation Format**

Devall, Bill (1994) THE TURNAROUND DECADE *Trumpeter*: 11, 2.  
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