

The 10% rule

IT has been estimated that the human species constitutes about 5% of the total animal biomass of the world (ants do better, at 20%), a value which is matched by only one other mammal — our own domesticated cattle (McNeill 2000). There has been some worry about the methane produced by so many cows, because of their contribution to greenhouse gases — a concern that led to the so-called fart tax proposed in New Zealand in relation to Kyoto commitments. While it might be difficult to agree on the biggest problem facing the planet, it is unlikely that farting cows would make the short-list, and it is not surprising that the fart tax foundered on political realities.

It is a fact that all 6+ billion humans currently living on the planet could be adequately fed using current technology and production systems. But it is estimated that if all those people could find a way to attain the living standards of an average citizen of an industrialized country (currently there are about 1.3 billion of us), then we would need three more planets to sustain them (Trauger *et al.* 2003).

It is also fair to say that due to globalization, most humans are aware of how the other half are living, and want the same. I hazard a guess that only a very small proportion of those on the up side of the “other half” (which fortunately for the planet is a fifth rather than a half) feel privileged. And I predict that the proportion feeling even slightly embarrassed by their relatively prodigious exploitation of the planet is vanishingly small.

The reality is that no matter what their current situation, most people seem to want just a little more than they already have. I call this **the 10% rule**. It goes like this:

What I already have is OK, but I do not seem to be as happy as I believe I could be. Surely, the reason I am not very happy is that I do not have enough X (where X could be anything, but is normally some kind of commodity). What would make me really happy is 10% more X.

Why the nominal 10%? Because most people cannot really conceive of having an enormous amount more than they currently have. A Cambodian farmer living in a barter society, with a cash income of US\$1/day and 1 ha of land to work, can understand how her productivity would improve with the addition of 0.1 ha of land. She also believes that working an additional 10% is achievable — one can always work a little harder. But it is physically impossible to work a lot harder when one is already pretty stretched. Give her a farm on the Canadian prairies (say 500 ha) and she would have unimaginable riches, but an impossible task.

At the other end of the scale, we might ask Oprah Winfrey what makes her happy. Trashy magazines, one of the great sources of information about the human condition, report that she has a US\$1 million/week spending habit. Having established such a spending habit (if she really has) as a norm, Oprah

presumably regards it as basic to a reasonable standard of living. As that is her norm, then in order to have a happy week she will likely apply the 10% rule, and spend 1.1 million.

The difficulty is that, once we have embraced consumerism, happiness tends to be defined in terms of spending, having, and the process of getting (which serves as entertainment). Happiness is obtained relative to the norm, so an addition to my normal standard is required for happiness.

Cambodia is a chronically overpopulated country, and for a Cambodian, X will almost invariably be land. Cambodia has recently implemented a policy of handing out land to people, the land having become available due to demining and other post-war cleanup operations. The consequence, not surprisingly, is that some people have grown richer. But Cambodians have big families and a strong commitment to family. In most families there will be those who receive, and those who do not. Those with extra riches immediately feel the pressure to share, and the effects are predictable. Having been granted extra land, our farmer immediately invites her husband's brother and his family to live with them and share the new riches. The per capita effect? A reduction in riches, increased unhappiness, and a positive government initiative that founders on demographic and social realities.

Ethiopians are a fundamentally happy people — they get through each day laughing, singing, and taking pleasure in the company of others. Yet by any reasonable standard, rural Ethiopians have nothing. The 10% rule can explain why such people are happy despite living in what appears to be a state of extreme poverty. If you have nothing, then adding 10% every day is trivially easy. That analysis is not trite or condescending. Ethiopians do not define their happiness in terms of creature comforts and consumer items, and so do not need them in order to value and enjoy their lives.

The photo on the cover of this issue, taken in 2004, shows a group of African children watching a video. You cannot see it in the photo, so I have to tell you that for those children, this is the very first time they have seen TV. They live in eastern Angola at a place called Lucusse, which is at the centre of the area controlled by the non-government side of the recently-ended 26 year civil war.

These kids live pretty much as rural African children have lived for thousands of years. They have no running water, no sanitation, and no healthcare. The core of their diet is (to a western palate!) a tasteless carbohydrate sludge derived from either maize or cassava root, produced using the most primitive of technology powered entirely by human muscle. Commodities in the industrialized sense simply do not exist in their lives.

A visiting demining team brought the TV, generator and DVD player. For me, the extraordinary

thing was that those kids knew all about television. They knew it existed, they knew it required electricity, and they knew it supplied entertainment. From the moment it was unpacked, to the arrival of every kid in town, was about 15 minutes. When the generator would not start, they all drifted away. An hour later it was working, and they showed up again within minutes of its sound being heard. In the photo they are watching an Arnold Schwarzenegger movie, in English with Portuguese subtitles. They knew neither English nor Portuguese, but that did not matter because they could not read anyway. They showed up again the next evening in the hope that the movie would be run again. Same movie, different movie. It made no difference to them. Please, just turn on the TV.

Those kids made their first foray into consumerism that day, and it was easy to see that they would take all that they could get. One wonders if it was their first step in a desperate life-long search for commodity-driven happiness.

Cambodia is one step ahead of rural Africa. Anywhere in Cambodia, TV antennae can be seen sprouting from grass huts. Power is supplied by small generators producing an evening pall of blue smoke that settles across the landscape on a windless day. Rural Cambodians still plough the fields with oxen, live in a barter society, and forage for much of their protein off the land. Although primitive, their technology is considerably ahead of many parts of rural Africa. Key commodities in rural Cambodia today are generators, TVs, motorbikes and nylon fishing nets, and presumably the infrastructure involves some kind of fuel distribution system.

I could go on, but the point is made. If opportunity presents, people will inevitably embrace consumerism. And the opportunity is presenting across the planet, possibly at ever-increasing rates. Can the planet support 6+ billion people at the standard of living that I currently enjoy, much less that of Oprah Winfrey? I doubt it, and I suspect that global warming is not the source of the biggest environmental challenge to be faced in the next 100 years. It is the 10% rule that we need to deal with.

The above is what came out when I sat down to write my first Editorial for *Pacific Conservation Biology* (*PCB*). It reflects my ponderings during five years of working in the minefields of the world, during which I saw endless variations on the theme of destruction - of infrastructure, of the environment, and of the human condition. Our species has an extraordinary gift for innovation and creativity, yet is just downright disappointing much of the time. Nowhere have I seen that sense of missed opportunity captured so evocatively as in Harry Recher's recent Editorial on "hope" (2005, Vol 11:3), where Harry attempted to describe the hopeful things that he could see happening in environmental management of planet Earth. In doing so, he managed to convey a sense of utter and abject despondency.

Personally, I thought that Harry was searching for hope in the wrong places. It will not be found in the good works of politicians and their systems, which specialize in the art of compromise. But it can be found in the generosity and purpose of individual people, with Harry himself being a prime example.

During my time in the minefields, I maintained contact with conservation issues on the Pacific rim through this Journal. I carried it to many forgotten and unhappy corners of the planet where it provided welcome contact with a saner world. Under the care of Harry Recher, *PCB* has grown into the mature product that we see today, with quality analyses, solid biology, provocative forum articles, and the quirky and entertaining Editorial column. It is one of the few places where natural history can still be published, due to Harry's belief that to do good conservation, you should first do good biology. I take the opportunity here, on behalf of all clients of *PCB*, to express our deepest thanks for his time and devotion to that task.

Where should the Journal go from here? This question is up for discussion now, and I look forward to comments of the readers and authors. A significant issue currently facing journal editors everywhere is the problem of obtaining good peer review. Due to current policies in government, and the overwhelming demands of academic jobs, quality peer review as a process of maintaining scientific standards is failing. Indeed, it may be dead already. The publishing process is also being channelled by government-run evaluation exercises which link directly to funding, and a direct consequence is that *PCB* may be missing submissions because of its citation status.

Initially, I intend to step lightly into Harry's giant shoes while considering options for the Journal. Clearly, the way ahead involves embracing the world of publishing. But the Journal will ultimately fail unless our primary audience, the conservation scientists of the Pacific rim, submit quality manuscripts. And to be blunt — they also need to cite the previously published papers in *PCB* whenever and wherever possible. Quality submissions and improved citation rates create a positive feedback loop that can only benefit the Journal and its authorship. So please, apply the 10% rule to *PCB*! Cite *PCB* every time you publish; and submit your best mss to *PCB*.

REFERENCES

- McNeill, J., 2000. Something new under the sun: an environmental history of the 20th century. *Penguin* 421 Pp.
- Trauger, D. L., Czech, B., Erickson, J. D., Garetson, P. R., Kernohan, B. J. and Miller, C. A., 2003. The relationship of economic growth to wildlife conservation. *Wildl. Soc. Tech. Rev.* 03-1. The Wildlife Society, Bethesda, Maryland. 22 Pp.

Ian McLean