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Editorial

The preservation of the world

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Again and again it comes to this, the questions that we have not answered and always seem inadequately to address. How should we relate to one another as humans? How should we humans relate to the whole living and physical world and the biosphere? The word 'should' is necessary, for these are and always have been the great ethical questions. They cannot be answered, or even addressed, by modern material science.

In this second issue of ***World Nutrition***, some aspects of these questions are addressed by Association founder member Harriet Kuhnlein. In turn, responses come from the networks of people she and her colleagues at the Centre for Indigenous Peoples' Nutrition and Environment (CINE) at McGill University in Québec, Canada, joyously work with, all over the world. Her commentary is entitled 'Here is the good news'. To hear this, we need first to consider strange thoughts and hard stories. Those below are from what is now 'the Americas'. Such histories have been played out in the rest of the world, in different forms, at some time or another.

Here we are on earth

In the 1960s, one of the bibles carried by those who perceived the dawning of the Age of Aquarius, was a book of photographs by Eliot Porter (1), with quotations from Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*. The book's title is also a Thoreau quote: *In Wildness is the Preservation of the World*. Looking at it now, what's curious is that apart

from one shot of a mother bird feeding her chicks in a nest by a clapboard wall, and another of a mossy stone wall, there seems to be no imprint of humans. The book seems to be saying that the world would be better without us, which is no doubt why it was carried in many hippie rucksacks along with other new-age manuals.

But here is a drafter of this editorial here, who is a human looking at pictures taken by another human, printed in a book made by other humans and by human-made machines. In a sense the impression given by the book is a fraud. Here we are, on earth. What shall we do? Besides, any book on 'nature' is no more realistic than a book that seems to imply that 'the world' is epitomised by Los Angeles or Mumbai. Most pictures of 'the natural world' are of scenes shaped or created by humans.

True, this is less so of mountains and oceans. But most 'wild' trees and plants and flowers are cultivated, or have been at some time, much 'wilderness' is the site of eradicated forests, and much desert was once gardens – or cities. A profound observation concerning the origin of the human species is that we did not, as generally supposed, rise up as a species almost in isolation out of a semi-arid savannah of the rift valley of Africa. The location is no doubt correct, but at the time when advanced primates evolved, what is now almost a moon-like surface was made fertile by mighty lakes and rivers. It was an Eden (2).

The implications for our understanding of our place on earth are also profound. We arose up by water, interdependent with ecosystems teeming with fish and abundant in all sorts of animals, birds, and other living creatures and things. The lament of *Ma-ka-tai-me-she-kia-kiak*, or Black Hawk, Chief of the Sauk and Fox, is of a truly primaeval way of life: 'We always had plenty. Our children never cried from hunger, neither were our people in want. .. The rapids of Rock River furnished us with an abundance of excellent fish, and the land being very fertile never failed to produce good crops of corn, beans, pumpkins, and squashes'. And then he adds, of the consequences of the 'Indian wars': 'If a prophet had come to our village in those days and told us that the things were to take place which have since come to pass, none of our people would have believed him' (3).

Among the original North Americans, as far as we can tell, chronic diet-related diseases were practically unknown, and all societies were dedicated to ensuring that their children were well nourished. Most of the infections incubated by crowding arrived with the Europeans, who habitually remarked on the strength, stamina and physique of the natives. Their life was dangerous compared with ours, deaths caused by accidents, injury and animal attacks were common, and their overall average lifespan was probably quite a lot shorter than ours. Elderly people frequently died in good health of old age.

The false notion of the 'primitive'

We – here meaning those of us who have grown up within industrial societies, and in particular within countries that once had empires – have been given the impression, at school and afterwards, that original peoples were 'primitive'. The underlying meaning is that we, and our ancestors who massacred and displaced them, knew more and were wiser than them. Such beliefs were a strange excuse for exterminating them as if vermin, in the name of 'civilisation'.

This notion of 'the primitive', used to label pre-literate societies, is generally mistaken. Many pre-literate, pre-industrial communities led wretched and squalid lives, as do around a billion people now who survive in slums and shanty-towns. Many previous cultures were brutal and stupid. But concerning the understanding by humans of other species, here is Claude Lévi-Strauss, quoting RB Fox, an observer of the Filipino pygmy tribes: 'Another characteristic of Negrito life… which strikingly demarcates them from the surrounding Christian lowlanders, is their inexhaustible knowledge of the plant and animal kingdoms. This lore includes not only a specific recognition of a phenomenal number of plants, animals and insects, but also includes a knowledge of the habits and behaviour of each' (4,5). And further, of their medicinal, nutritional and culinary value. Lévi-Strauss adds: 'Their extreme familiarity with their biological environment, the passionate attention which they pay to it, and their precise knowledge of it, has often struck inquirers as an indication of attitudes and preoccupations which distinguish the natives from their white visitors'.

Vanished civilisations

In their books *1491*(6), and *Stolen Continents* (7) Charles C Mann and Ronald Wright show how the original people of what is now the Americas lived, before the Europeans came. We may have the impression that the typical original North American people were gatherer-hunters and pastoralists living in tents, on land essentially untouched by humans. Not so. There were cities in what are now the Southern states of the USA. In the 13th century Cahokia, near what is now St Louis, Missouri, is reckoned to have had 40,000 inhabitants, then comparable with London and Paris. The system of governance known as the *Haudenosaunee,* of the Iroquois Confederacy formed by the Seneca, Cayoga, Onondaga, Oneida, Mohawk and Tuscarora nations of what is now New England and South-Western Canada, was probably originally set out and agreed around 1150 CE, is the second oldest continuous system of representative democracy. This system included what the Confederacy termed 'The Great Law of Peace', which Benjamin Franklin admired, and which influenced him and others as they framed the US Constitution.

Nor is it true that the native North Americans always refused to accommodate to the 'white man's ways'. The Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw and Seminole voted for 'civilisation'. The Cherokee of what is now Tennessee and Alabama, encouraged by President Jefferson, built their capital city of Echota in what is now Georgia, built houses in the European style, farmed with then modern methods, developed a written language, schools and newspapers, and had their own constitution, until driven away 30 years later by President Jackson's Indian Removal Bill.

The false notion of the 'savage'

A reason why early European records give the impression that much of the northern Americas were sparsely inhabited, was that the germs of European infections advanced faster than the European conquerors, killing most of many native populations and destroying their social fabric. Another reason was that news of the behaviour of the invaders towards the native people also spread ahead of the soldiers, so those that could, 'disappeared' into the mountains and forests, where they were harder to find, enslave or massacre.

In this way another myth sprang up, of the 'noble savage'. Yes, many native societies, such as some of those who lived east of the Andes in what is now Latin America, were still paleolithic or mesolithic, although their pottery and other artefacts were beautiful. But not long after the arrival of the Europeans, many others were from more advanced cultures who had become fugitives.

Amazonia is an example. The first Europeans to navigate the Amazon from its headwaters in Perú to the ocean, in 1541, were led by Francesco Orellana. Gaspar de Carvajal, a companion of Orellana and the chronicler of this epic, recorded 'numerous and very large settlements and very pretty country and very fruitful land' and, within one constantly inhabited stretch or more than a hundred miles 'there could be seen some very large cities'. Carvajal also said that at one point the Spaniards were attacked by tall bare-breasted women who lived without men – hence the name 'Amazon' – so all his stories were discounted.

However, cross-disciplinary research now shows that people of the lower Amazon were growing crops more than 4,000 years ago. Charles Clement of the Brazilian National Institute for Amazon Research (INPA) in Manaus, is sure that Orellana recorded a sophisticated farming culture that was really was then there (though the women warriors may have been a flight of fancy). These civilisations were based on fishing and farming by the river banks, and also on cultivation of the forest – not just slash-and-burn clearance, but methodical replacement of the original forest with cultivated trees. The 'wild' fruits of Amazonia, such as pineapple, Brazil nut, *pupunya*, *açai, babaçu*, *cupuaçu*, *tucumá*, and many other palm, tree and bush fruits, some intensely

rich in nutrients such as carotenoids and vitamin C, some good sources of protein, have been cultivated for millennia, for food and medicine and also as material for clothes, dyes, tools, building, and other purposes.

This has only recently been understood, because the farmers that Orellana saw died quickly from disease and also massacre, or else vanished into the deep forest, where some of their descendants still live, although now in much more primitive conditions. 'Visitors are always amazed that you can walk in the forest here and constantly pick fruit from trees' says Charles Clement. 'That's because people planted them. They're walking through old orchards'.

The question of 'the Other'

The Europeans in the Americas did not want to respect or even recognise such things, because conscience is eased by the belief that other humans who are being extirpated are inferior. An alternative sentimental rationale, is that 'simple' people are like animals, needing to be 'protected' by being put into zoos, otherwise known as 'reservations'. Such notions have shaped the world in which we all live now.

Another terrible attitude that has shaped our world is that other civilisations must be destroyed not because they are inferior, but because they are superior. Not in all respects, of course, because a civilisation that is superior in every way cannot be destroyed by other humans, as long as it remains integrated with its living and physical resources. But all societies are vulnerable in some ways.

A prime example we live with, is the annihilation of the Aztec, Maya and Inka empires of what is now Mexico, Central America, and Andean South America. Here is Bernal Díaz, who was one of the band commanded by Hernan Cortez. Entering Itzapalapa and approaching Tenochtitlan (the site of Mexico City) in 1519, Díaz records (8): 'The sight of the palaces in which they lodged us! They were very spacious and well-built, of magnificent stone, cedar wood… with great rooms and courts… [Then] we went to the orchard and garden… the paths choked with roses and other flowers, and the many local fruit-trees… I stood looking at it, and I thought that no land like it would ever be discovered in the whole world, for at that time Perú was neither known nor thought of. But today all that I then saw is overthrown and destroyed: nothing is left standing'.

The French philosopher Tzvetan Todorov proposes a theory of 'The Other', which fits with the facts of the rationally completely purposeless atrocities perpetrated on the original peoples of Mexico, Central America, Peru and the Andean region by the Spanish conquerors. The reason was because the original civilisations were more than

different value systems, they were 'The Other', which jealous, ignorant, and brutal Europeans could not bear to acknowledge, or even let live.

What we can learn now

What does all this tell us about our place in this world? There is a warm and hopeful message in all the very many strange stories of the ascendancy of the type of civilisation in which almost all of us live now. It is that in some ways we are strong, rich, wise and fortunate, and that in other ways we are weak, poor, foolish and wretched, and that it is not yet quite too late for us to learn. For there remain populations in many parts of the world who in different ways, according to history, choice and circumstance, have largely kept what we have mostly lost. They have made a better job of preserving the world than we have. They generally have a better idea of what is good for them, including their food systems and diets, than we do. They also may have a better idea of what is good for us than we do.

Among these are the peoples whose ways of life are being respected and recorded by Harriet Kuhnlein and her colleagues at CINE at McGill, and of course by the peoples themselves. Their food systems and supplies and nutrition are integrated within their whole ways of living and being. This is part of their good news for us.

Their view of life is perhaps well represented by a statement made by representatives of the *Haudenosaunee*, together with the Diné (Navajo) and Lakota (Sioux) in 1978 (10). 'In the beginning, we were told that the human beings who walk upon the Earth have been provided with all things necessary for life. We were instructed to carry a love for one another, and to show a great respect for all beings of this Earth. We were shown that our life exists with the tree life, that our well-being depends on the well-being of the vegetable life, that we are close relatives of the four-leggeds. In our way, Spiritual consciousness is the highest form of politics'.

We have much to learn.

The editors

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