

Dispatch from the Plant Underground

Dispatch 15: What will you eat when you crash?



Bronzeback Snake eats Malabar Gliding Frog

Sept 30th 2011

Dear friends,

Thank you, to so many of you, and immensely, for your heartfelt responses to Dispatch 14: *Will you yell back at history you meant to do better? It wasn't just you?*

My mother, after reading it, chivvied me in her motherly way. Such bleak thought needs to be followed up by action, or at least we need to articulate equally urgently, what we must do. And she, being the epitome of action in my life (topic for another dispatch!), was entirely right.

Well I can't (and don't want to) tell anyone else what to do, but it's clear that action must happen from more of us, for the earth, each actionista to her own means (the number of women who responded to the last dispatch overwhelms tenfold the number of men, it is very odd this!).

I'll tell you some stories, meanwhile.

###

Last year, when the onion prices rocketed, I was chatting with my friend Janu, of the Adiya tribe, who lives and works at the Sanctuary.

I said: Jan-jan, we are going to have to live on rice and pickle soon. Thank goodness we have a rice field at the Sanctuary but for us all to live from that, we'll have to eat once a day, not three times.

She said: what's the big deal? that's how we eat at (my parents') home. Then she went on to include fish and crabs and tubers and mushrooms and wild ferns.

Later, while walking around the land I thought to myself: we can eat bush spinach (leaves of many different shrubs, herbs and trees), *Dioscorea* and *Colocasia* tubers, wild mushrooms for variety (there's a bracket fungus still to be checked out), and jackfruit, green and ripe (the seeds too), and Ainili seeds, and mango, and other fruit. We're okay for survival, of course it matters how many people are here.

Since we have cows at the Sanctuary, who open graze mostly, dairy products are not an issue. With their manure, we can continue small scale cultivation. We can also plant more perennial chilly (can even eat leaves of some of the varieties), and we can eat fruit of the native perennial *Solanum*. There's pumpkin, and chowchow (chayote), seasonal Amaranth and the many spices.

So long as the monsoon brings rain, water won't be an issue. Because we've regrown the forest, there are natural springs still flowing, and, unless someone takes control of the water source, there's plenty of clean unpolluted water from this valley for us and folks downstream (though Wolfgang, most likely, will be thinking of the plants first).

####

Of course when the big land crunch really happens, the question is: will the lowland folks move to the highlands because of sea level rise, or will the highland folks flee to the lowlands because of upland headwater death (I talked to my Palni hills friends recently about their water crisis).

####

Such are the debates that run between many of us in the last (part-wild) places: will it be food first, or water first? Will it be the water wars or the food wars? Will it be remigration of urban people to the land, or will it be like 2012, the movie, with the rich buying their way into the ark when the apocalypse strikes? In the real version, there is no ark (Richard Branson's space shuttles fuelled by laughing gas aside).

####

My biggest dietary worry (for when things get really bad) is whether I'll be able to eat larvae and snails. Sometimes, on my walks at the river, I bump into small bands of Paniya people, and I watch them catch fish with their baskets and also pick up freshwater molluscs. My friend Sandeep (Paniya) taught me how to catch crabs many years ago (and then we let them go).

Also, there is a fat cricket with spiny mandibles and spiny forelegs who I find really creepy, who likes my room for some reason, who I might battle to prey upon, when that day comes.

Oh, this reminds me, there is the giant African snail that's invaded south India, many scary reports are coming in about the spread of this exotic species. I'm now wondering if they are edible.

I'm thinking about diet because when the oil prices further hit the roof, we too will be hit if we are dependant on transport for our staple food items. Then we'll all start thinking on very different lines about food.

###

The moral vegetarians will be the worst hit, along with the urban poor! Though Wolfgang will rather fast unto death if he can't eat honey, curd and fruit (his main diet for decades). He'd rather starve than eat snails. He's quite self sufficient that way, easy with survival on bare minimum.

An old friend of his told me, even as a teenager, Wolfgang would go on trips with just a toothbrush in hand, he never *had* anything. Also, he's the only one of us who's ever actually begged for food. When he came to the Sanctuary in 1971 he had a slingbag and a little notebook, that is *all* he had, along with a lungi and waistcoat. (And look what happened!).

Considering this and the fact that he's been on a plane once in the last 40 years, as well as grown degraded land to forest, as well as lived in a community that supports non-humans, he not only has a very low carbon footprint, he's thrown his lot in with the forest.

Me? I'm not a purist, I might turn to eating snails and crickets, or grass (if I can persuade some bacteria to live in my gut). I might steal the eggs of junglefowl.

###

There's also homeopathic eating. Minuscule, but potent quantities, ingested periodically. I've just invented the term.

My aunt is a homeopathic eater, and at 80 plus years also has one of the smallest carbon footprints in the world (for urban humans).

Her diet is really weird. She has a daily intake of 100 ml of coffee (with milk and sugar), in three or four small intakes, and if it's available, 30-50 ml of Pepsi (a sip at a time), and 25 grams or less of junk food. She does not eat rice, vegetables, lentils, curd, cheese, eggs. She can, on some days, be persuaded to eat one small 2 cm cube of banana or mango. She has done this for 50 years (before Pepsi it was Thumbs Up, and before that Coca-cola and Fanta).

I'm sure she can live without the Pepsi, and the junk food, and that she can have lemon juice instead. But the tricky thing for her is to give up white sugar.

As she doesn't eat solid food, her cooking for herself is minimal (very light on fuel). As she's a great cook (for others), you could say she lives on molecules volatilizing from the pan and entering her through her nostrils, a kind of aroma-diet.

She supports coffee which is better than tea as a plantation crop (though this too should give way to forest), and she supports animals (which are essential in any half-sane agroecosystem). She does support a multinational (Pepsi! for heaven's sake!), but she doesn't fly, nor does she own a car, nor does she possess her own concrete house, nor does she commute, and her husband was a freedom

fighter. The balance is very good with her. She doesn't really support agriculture (barring the sugar), which doesn't support the land nor human health, pumped full as it is with petroleum and horrid pesticides.

###

All this is to say, if you are a lifestylist, or if you want to prepare for the crash: you can start eating differently, and eating a lot less, which means you support food production systems that don't require fossil fuels and don't require either deforestation or the suppression of forests, and you can quit unnecessary items (tea, coffee, sugar, tobacco, imported fruit and produce of irrigated agriculture). You can also campaign hard to take out the tea, sugarcane, biofuels and soya-for-cattle areas, so you can grow back the forest, or, so that the forest can grow itself back.

If you have any doubts, you can ask yourself, would you rather have a tea garden or a forest?

And while you're doing that you can also address the problem of invasive species: you can get out wattle and eucalyptus and lantana and *Prosopis julifera* and *Wedelia* and *Eupatorium* or support those who are already doing this. If you want to be wattle basher and don't know how, call us or any of our friends in the mountains doing restoration work.

###

But there's more to all this. On a slight different note, here are some further thoughts.

#####

As is true for almost everyone I know in the environmental field, I love my work. As is also true for almost everyone I know, I hate what we've done to the earth, and I'm apocalyptic.

I ask everyday, what do I need to do differently, or what more do I do?

###

The answer, is more obvious to me now than it was twenty years ago, when I began. Part of this is because when younger, I believed in collective change. I don't think the problem is what or who I love, or what I will do to protect what or whom I love, but rather the idea that we, always a mysterious we, could *together* save the ship from sinking.

As I've realized from the very varied responses to Dispatch 14, this too is something many of my friends have come to feel. Despair comes from this broken dream of *the collective*.

This is understandable, but perhaps the mistake is that we didn't talk enough together in the first place. Or, in the right way.

So, in addition to dietary politics and pulling out exotics and making way for the forest to grow back, I do feel one of the things we can do is to work harder at recognizing the nature of the problem. For a great deal is at stake (the biosphere), and the very least we can do is to look at this (together or alone).

###

It's clear to me, I can't tell anyone else what to do, and I wouldn't want to tell anyone else what to do, because action not born from love, leads us further into peril. But I can ask questions, and can share my (perhaps simplistic) understanding of what some of my many friends are doing.

But, here's what I want to do: I want to stop deforestation entirely today. I want to stop fossil fuel extraction and emission completely today, and lead my life with all the changes that implies, though it's not my life that's the issue here, it's the life of the planet.

The question is: what means would I use, how would I go about it? I don't mean just stopping personally to travel by car and plane, I mean wholesale stopping. Because only this will work, not reducing by a few percent over the next few decades, something we should have done decades ago.

Everyday this is the issue I cannot avoid: in the face of continued deforestation and continued emissions, everything else we do is like taking poisons out of a river downstream by the thimbleful, when it is flooding in from upstream by the tankerful.

We need lots of thimbles and lots of people, the pressing question, then, being: how do we get all these people together fast enough, when it seems we don't see the problems collectively in the first place?

Some people are asking: why not bust the tanker? Or in other words, like the physicist David Bohm articulated 25 years ago: why not tackle things at their source?

Whatever the action, what is the measure of it? How do we gauge its success? It's pretty clear that the measure will be in the health of the land and the water and the air. What other measure could there be today? The old communities did not separate their politics and spirituality from their lifestyle and the land. Why do we?

###

It's clear that every clean energy solution, every recycling option, every acre of earth restored, has to be measured against what is lost, not what is recovered from wasteland, against what is emitted and not what is marginally (and most often symbolically only, on paper) mitigated. The baseline has to be the extent of primary forest lost, not the extent of wasteland regeneration gained, though the latter is crucial to do.

##

The more of us who stop the main agents responsible for the poisoning, or block them to buy time for earth restorers to do their work (next paragraph) or render them incapable of poisoning at all, the better.

My friends in the Save the Western Ghats movements: Latha Anantha, Carmen Miranda, Claude Alvares, Pandu Hegde, Samir Mehta, Archana Godbole, Hartman D'Souza, Anitha Sharma, Ritwick Dutta, Pratim Roy, the extraordinary youth of Goa; the array of fighters and campaigners and journalists, conservationists, lobbyists and frontline activists all across Kerala and Tamil Nadu and other parts of this mountain region have been at it a long time.

###

Then there my other friends in the ecosystem (earth) restoration side of things. I marvel at how some of them too have been at it for a long time, how some had been aware of ecological holocaust decades ago, how they didn't require the weatherman to tell them which way the wind blows.

Wolfgang has been at it since 1978. He, a hippie drop out kid from Berlin, tending now for three decades and more to the well being of the tender mosses and ferns and other plants of the Western Ghats, seeing clearly that the forest was/is a community of thousands of different plant beings.

The Vattakanal Conservation Trust, The Forest Way Trust, The Krishnamurti Foundation Schools, Centre for Learning Bangalore, all these groups have brought or are bringing back habitats in areas that were completely destroyed, and the schools just mentioned have clearly stated in their objectives that children must grow up in nature to have an abiding lifelong relationship with nature.

Then wider afield: my desert flora restorer friend Pradip Krishen, my wildlife gardener friends in the UK working on meadows and woodlands; and the astonishing Adyar Poonga project in Chennai, as well as scientists who like to get their hands dirty: the Anamalais project of Nature Conservation Foundation, and other places like the Land Institute in Kansas (where I first learned about prairie restoration extending into agroecosystem design), and my friends in Brazil, earth systems scientist Antonio Nobre fighting for the Amazon as well as encouraging restoration and agroforestry, and indigenous peoples' land struggles, as well as policy.

I wish to mention one additional thing. Intact forests, intact habitats worldwide, have had human communities living in them, since human history. Satellite data shows that the overlap between indigenous human presence, and forest presence is very high, in fact where you have desertification is where you have cities, or the effects of cities and the agricultural peasantry that serves the city (read the fantastic compendium of essays edited by Mahesh Rangarajan on the environmental history of India, and you wonder, sacred India? huh? there's been deforestation for three thousand years, it's the hill tribes and nomadic pastoralists who know anything about "sacred", not the ancient Hindu scriptures!).

This of course means that the "wealthiest" peoples today are the indigenous humans in deep forests (with all the minerals and resources and headwaters still to be plundered), and that they are also the ones who have the real skills to survive when the oil disappears, and also that they are the ones most in danger of being annihilated.

In India (and it seems elsewhere too), habitat means human presence, not absence. Definitions of pristine habitat or wilderness include fairly large numbers of adivasis (I think there are more than 80 million adivasis in India).

Besides, if anyone knows how to live in the forest and *with* the forest in ways that *sustain* the forest, it is the indigenous peoples. If any of you at this point want to raise the issue of Easter Islanders or how the Maoris killed the last moas in New Zealand, inform yourselves then of the several thousand indigenous groups still alive today and look at *where* they are, they who have been living in place for 10s of 1000s of years, and look at *how* they live. Don't quote the exceptional group that overused its environment. And listen to Jared Diamond in a talk where he raises a question about those societies that did not collapse, where he asks: why did they not?

It seems the only lifestyle that is truly sustainable is of the indigenous peoples, the adivasis. Solutions lie with them, not really with the technologists.

We need to ally with them, like Keystone Foundation has done, as have the Shola Trust, Sherly Joseph and K. J. Baby, ACCORD, EBR and other groups have done and are doing. It is as crucial to support them as it is to support wild nature (the two are not separate), and not because they can help us, but because it is the right thing to do!

###

Someday I'll put together what all my friends and I think we all could do and mail this out. I've only mentioned the courses of action to do with nature directly, I have not talked about cultural and social and educational and political issues, there is so much to be done, there is a whole *ecology of action* that folks at the Sanctuary know very well, and folks in the Save the Western Ghats movement know very well too.

Sudhirendhar Sharma and I came up with a web of actionaries in one of our SWGM meetings: firefighters, whistle blowers, propagandists, fighters, healers, dismantlers, catalysts, artists, strategists, informers, moles, visionaries, networkers: for the short run.

Educators, horticulturalists and ecosystem restorers: for the long run.

.###

The nub of this dispatch is this: the natural world is primary. We have to back it with our hearts, bodies and minds, with everything we have. We need to back the natural system, with its utterly marvelous and supportive matrix of beings that gives everyone the real possibility to live and our children to live.

With nature there is a happily ever after. With industrial civilization there is none.

###

Here's the last note for this dispatch:

While Wolfgang and others rescue more plants from roadsides and damsites, and nurture species together with environments (in my biased eye, the most tender and beautiful of actions), I shall travel out to meet other friends in other parts of the world, on a tour we are all collectively organizing called: Rainforest Etiquette in a World Gone Mad.

The venues are diverse. University of East Anglia, Brockwood Park School, Wageningen University, London School of Economics, The Land Institute (Kansas), University of Kansas, Lawrence, Oakgrove School, as well as a number of small public venues, including an evening in London with singer-songwriter KT Tunstall.

Thanks to the support of KT and Arundhati Roy, I have the ticket and possibility to do this.

Thanks to Stefi Barna, Lorenzo Castellari, Mans Lanting and Maryan Klomp, Derek Hook, Jayaraj Sundaresan and Shabnum Tejani, Stan and Priti Cox, K. Gopalakrishna, I look forward to these meetings. I am not as nervous as I might have been, after all I've spent months and months communing with birds and frogs, and cicadas and flowers and leeches and slanting light through canopy leaves in the convivial hub of the rainforest in the monsoon.

I leave on 29th September. And will be back on November 24th. My trip is bracketed by two events that I will attend, the first is the Ecocide Trial in London and the second is Earth at Risk, a public event in San Francisco on November 13th, where Derrick Jensen will interview Arundhati and several other amazing people. Check out both online.

For the children, and their children and their children's children

and for the wild ones,

Best wishes

Suprabha

P. S. I started writing this before I left home, and finished it on the flight, but I've had no time to edit, and it's off to you a week after all that. Apologies for mistakes!