

Gary Snyder – “Four Changes” (1970)

I. POPULATION

Humanity is but a part of the fabric of life — dependent on the whole fabric for our very existence. As the most highly developed tool-using animal, we must recognize that the unknown evolutionary destinies of other life forms are to be respected, and act as gentle steward of the earth’s community of being.

There are now too many human beings, and the problem is growing rapidly worse. It is potentially disastrous not only for the human race but for most other life forms.

ACTION:

First, a massive effort to convince the governments and leaders of the world that the problem is severe. And that all talk about raising food-production — well intentioned as it is — simply puts off the only real solution: reduce population. Try to correct traditional cultural attitudes that tend to force women into childbearing — remove income tax deductions for more than two children above a specified income level, and scale it so that lower income families are forced to be careful too — or pay families to limit their number. Take a vigorous stand against the policy of the right-wing in the Catholic hierarchy and any other institutions that exercise an irresponsible social force in regard to this question; oppose and correct simple-minded boosterism that equates population growth with continuing prosperity. Work ceaselessly to have all political questions be seen in the light of this prime problem.

Share the pleasure of raising children widely, so that all need not directly reproduce to enter into this basic human experience. Adopt children. Let reverence for life and reverence for the feminine mean also a reverence for other species, and future human lives, most of which are threatened.

II. POLLUTION

Pollution is of two types. One sort results from an excess of some fairly ordinary substance — smoke, or solid waste — which cannot be absorbed or transmuted rapidly enough to offset its introduction into the environment, thus causing changes the great cycle is not prepared for. (All organisms have wastes and by-products, and these are indeed part of the total biosphere: energy is passed along the line and refracted in various ways. This is cycling, not pollution.) The other sort is powerful modern chemicals and poisons, products of recent technology, which the biosphere is totally unprepared for. Such is DDT and similar chlorinated hydrocarbons — nuclear testing fallout and nuclear waste — poison gas, germ and virus storage and leakage by the military; and chemicals which are put into food, whose long-range effects on human beings have not been properly tested.

The human race in the last century has allowed its production and scattering of wastes, by-products, and various chemicals to become excessive. Pollution is directly harming life on the planet: which is to say, ruining the environment for humanity itself. We are fouling our air and water, and living in noise and filth that no “animal” would tolerate, while advertising and politicians try to tell us “we’ve never had it so good.”

ACTION:

Effective international legislation banning DDT and related poisons — with no fooling around. The collusion of certain scientists with the pesticide industry and agribusiness in trying to block this legislation must be brought out in the open. Strong penalties for water and air pollution by industries. Phase out the internal combustion engine and fossil fuel use in general — more research into non-polluting energy sources; solar energy; the tides. No more kidding the public about atomic waste disposal: it's impossible to do it safely, and nuclear-power generated electricity cannot be seriously planned for as it stands now.

Stop all germ and chemical warfare research and experimentation; work toward a hopefully safe disposal of the present staggering and stupid stockpiles of H-Bombs, cobalt gunk, germ and poison tanks and cans. Laws and sanctions against wasteful use of paper etc. which adds to the solid waste of cities. Develop methods of recycling solid urban waste. Recycling should be the basic principle behind all waste-disposal thinking. Thus, all bottles should be re-usable; old cans should make more cans; old newspapers back into newsprint again. Stronger controls and research on chemicals in foods. A shift toward a more varied and sensitive type of agriculture (more small scale and subsistence farming) would eliminate much of the call for blanket use of pesticides.

Use fewer cars. Cars pollute the air, and one or two people riding lonely in a huge car is an insult to intelligence and the Earth. Share rides, legalize hitch-hiking, and build hitch-hiker waiting stations along the highways. Also — a step toward the new world — walk more. Boycott bulky wasteful Sunday papers which use up trees. It's all just advertising anyway, which is artificially inducing more mindless consumption.

Refuse paper bags at the store. Organize Park and Street clean-up festivals. Don't work in any way for or with an industry which pollutes, and don't be drafted into the military

III. CONSUMPTION

Everything that lives eats food, and is food in turn. This complicated animal, homo sapiens, rests on a vast and delicate pyramid of energy-transformations. To grossly use more than you need to destroy is biologically unsound. Most of the production and consumption of modern societies is not necessary or conducive to spiritual and cultural growth, let alone survival — and is behind much greed and envy, age old causes of social and international discord.

Humanity's careless use of "resources" and our total dependence on certain substances such as fossil fuels (which are being exhausted, slowly but certainly), are having harmful effects on all the other members of the life-network. The complexity of modern technology renders whole populations vulnerable to the deadly consequences of the loss of any one key resource. Instead of independence we have over-dependence on life-giving substances such as water, which we squander. Many species of animals and birds have become extinct in the service of fashion fads — or fertilizer, or industrial oil. The soil is being used up; in fact humankind has become a locust-like blight on the planet that will leave a bare cupboard for its own children — all the while in a kind of Addict's Dream of affluence, comfort, eternal progress — using the great achievements of science to produce software and swill.

Goals: Balance, harmony, humility — growth which is a mutual growth with Redwood and Quail (would you want your child to grow up without ever hearing a wild bird?) — to be a good member of the great community of living creatures.

ACTION:

It must be demonstrated ceaselessly that a continually “growing economy” is no longer healthy, but a Cancer. And that the criminal waste which is allowed in the name of competition must be halted totally with ferocious energy and decision. Economics must be seen as a small sub-branch of Ecology, and production/distribution/consumption handled by companies or unions with the same elegance and spareness one sees in nature. Soil banks; open space; phase out logging in most areas.

Plan consumer boycotts in response to dishonest and unnecessary products. Politically, blast both “Communist” and “Capitalist” myths of progress, and all crude notions of conquering or controlling nature.

The inherent aptness of communal life: where large tools are owned jointly and used efficiently. The power of renunciation: If enough Americans refused to buy a new car for one given year it would permanently alter the American economy. Recycle clothes and equipment. Support handicrafts — gardening, home skills, midwifery, herbs — all the things that can make us independent, beautiful and whole. Learn to break the habit of unnecessary possessions — a monkey on everybody’s back — but avoid a self-abnegating, anti-joyous self-righteousness. Simplicity is light, carefree, neat, and loving — not a self-punishing ascetic trip.

It is hard to even begin to gauge how much a complication of possessions, the notions of “my and mine,” stand between us and a true, clear, liberated way of seeing the world. To live lightly on the earth, to be aware and alive, to be free of egotism, to be in contact with plants and animals, starts with simple concrete acts. Simplicity and mindfulness in diet is a starting point for many people.

IV. TRANSFORMATION

We have it within our deepest powers not only to change ourselves but to change our culture. If we are to survive on earth we must transform the five-millennia-long urbanizing civilization tradition into a new ecologically-sensitive, harmony-oriented, wild-minded scientific/spiritual culture.

Goal: Nothing short of total transformation will do much good. What we envision is a planet on which the human population lives harmoniously and dynamically by employing a sophisticated and unobtrusive technology — in a world environment which is “left natural.”

Specific points in this vision:

- A healthy and spare population of all races, much less in number than today.
- Cultural and individual diversity, unified by a type of world tribal council. Division by natural and cultural boundaries rather than arbitrary political boundaries.
- A technology of communication, education, and quiet transportation, land-use being sensitive to the properties of each region.
- A basic cultural outlook and social organization that inhibits power and property-seeking, while encouraging exploration and challenge in things like music, meditation, mathematics, mountaineering, magic, and all other ways of authentic being-in-the-world. Women totally free and equal. A new kind of family — responsible, but more festive and relaxed — is implicit.

ACTION:

Since it doesn't seem practical or even desirable to think that direct bloody force will achieve much, it would be best to consider this a continuing "revolution of consciousness" which will be won not by guns but by seizing the key images, myths, archetypes, eschatologies, and ecstasies so that life won't seem worth living unless one is on the transforming energy's side.

New schools, new classes, walking in the woods and cleaning up the streets. Create an awareness of "self" which includes the social and natural environment. Consider what specific language forms, symbolic systems, and social institutions constitute obstacles to ecological awareness. Let no one be ignorant of the facts of biology and related disciplines; bring up our children as part of the wild-life. Some communities can establish themselves in backwater rural areas and flourish — others maintain themselves in urban centers — and the two types work together, a two-way flow of experience, people, money, and home-grown vegetables.

Investigate new lifestyles. Work with political-minded people where it helps, hoping to enlarge their vision, and with people of all varieties of politics or thought at whatever point they become aware of environmental urgencies. Master the archaic and the primitive as models of basic nature-related cultures — as well as the most imaginative extensions of science — and build a community where these two vectors cross.

We are the first human beings in history to have all of humanity's culture and previous experience available to our study — the first members of a civilized society since the early Neolithic to wish to look clearly into the eyes of the wild and see our selfhood, our family, there. We have these advantages to set off the obvious disadvantages of being as screwed up as we are — which gives us a fair chance to penetrate into some of the riddles of ourselves and the universe.