

Bill McKibben

7. THE END OF NATURE?

Perhaps there looms before us what some call, rather dramatically, "the end of nature" (McKibben 1989). Formerly, we could count on the natural givens. "A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever" (Ecclesiastes 1:4). But not any more. In this century, humans have stressed these natural systems to the breaking point. The water is polluted; the soil is degraded; the wildlife are gone or going; forests are cut down; deserts advance on overgrazed lands. Humans are upsetting, irreversibly, even the climate; the change will be disastrous because it will be so rapid that natural systems cannot track it. In the twenty-first century, there will only be nature that has been tampered with, no more spontaneous nature.

Indeed, already "we live in a postnatural world." We live henceforth increasingly in "a world that is of our own making." "There's no such thing as nature any more" (McKibben 1989:60, 85, 89). Since the dawn of culture, humans have rebuilt their natural environments. No civilized humans can live in pure, pristine nature. But now there is a difference. Earlier, wild nature could also remain alongside culture. The natural givens stayed in place. There could not be wilderness everywhere, but there could be wilderness somewhere, lots of it, if we chose. There could be wildlands, more and less, all over the world. Wild creatures could coexist on their own in the reserves, the woodlots, the fencerows, the nooks, the crannies of civilization. But with acid rain, with pollutants everywhere, with carcinogens in the food chains, such coexistence is now impossible. With global warming accelerating climate change a hundred times over, "changing nature means changing everything" and this "seems infinitely sad" (McKibben 1989:78-79). Nothing, nowhere, can be wild and free any more.

From Holmes Rolston

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91

More on McKibben

McKibben, Bill, *The End of Nature*. New York: Random House, 1989. Pp. ix, 226. Originally a lengthy magazine article for *The New Yorker*, this is a highly readable and significant merging of scientific, religious, philosophical, and political thought concerning the environmental crisis.

McKibben begins with the scientific fact that humanity has altered the atmosphere, and thus the climate of the earth. Nothing, therefore, exists in the world untouched by human technology; the idea of a pure, unspoiled nature, existing somehow apart from human civilization, is an impossible contradiction. McKibben explores the meaning of this end of nature, particularly for religious and philosophical conceptions of humanity. The end of the book involves a tour through two opposing philosophical visions, continued domination of nature and resistance to human-centeredness.

Climbers clear trash from Everest.

A team of Americans plans to climb 29,000-foot Mount Everest to pick up the trash that has been left by previous climbing expeditions. Since Sir Edmund Hillary and Sherpa Tenzing Norgay first reached the summit of the world's highest peak in 1953, hundreds have followed in their footsteps. Climbing at that altitude without oxygen is exceedingly difficult and dangerous, so many carry 18 inch long canisters of oxygen weighing 10 pounds each. Common practice has been to throw the empty canisters away, instead of packing them out. Climbers do not want to carry unnecessary items when their lives are in jeopardy and when a single footstep can take eight breaths. The Nepalese Government has threatened to fine climbers who fail to take out their garbage and this has helped to reduce refuse at the 17,600-foot base camp. But the highest camp, 3000 feet below the summit, is littered with hundreds of oxygen bottles. The team of American climbers plans to bring these bottles back and to sell them as mementos. See AP story, "U.S. Climbers Plan to Clear Hikers' Trash From Everest," NY Times (4/7/98): A10.