

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.

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