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The Sixth Mass Extinction and The Monkey Grasping Trap: Human addictions and our march to collective suicide

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Abstract

The sixth mass extinction of species on planet earth is in progress, caused by humans. We are aware of the damages we are causing to our planet and of the suicidal danger to human survival and to survival of all other species on our planet, but are not taking adequate steps to halt this planetary destruction and self-destruction. This discussion considers some of the contributing factors to our behaviors, which clearly qualify as collective insanity.

Key words: sixth mass extinction, monkey grasping trap, collective suicide

Introduction

Scientists are saying we are in the midst of the sixth mass extinction of species that planet Earth has experienced. The first five were due to geological and planetary causes. This one is being caused by human beings.

The five previous mass extinctions and the present one

The previous five extinctions were precipitated by natural causes (Endangered Species International, Web reference):

1. *The Ordovician-Silurian extinction* was approximately 439 million years ago, caused by a drop in sea levels in an ice age, with subsequent rises in sea levels when the glaciers melted. In this extinction "25 percent of marine families and 60 percent of marine genera (the classification above species) were lost."
2. *The Late Devonian extinction* occurred about 364 million years ago, due to unknown causes. It is speculated that because the main species affected were those inhabiting warm waters it must have been due to another global cooling. This theory is supported by glacial deposits in northern Brazil dating back to this period. Another theory is that meteorite impacts could have contributed to this mass extinction, though there is little clear geological evidence to confirm this. "... [T]his mass extinction killed 22 percent of marine families and 57 percent of marine genera."

3. *The Permian-Triassic extinction*, our planet's most devastating one so far, was about 251 million years ago. It eliminated "95 percent of all species, 53 percent of marine families, 84 percent of marine genera, and an estimated 70 percent of land species such as plants, insects and vertebrate animals...". Again it is suspected that this may have been caused by the impact of a sizeable comet or asteroid. Another possibility is that there was a gigantic volcanic eruption, which spread lava from Siberia and led to a significant reduction in oxygen in the seas.. Yet another possibility is that the comet or asteroid initiated the volcanic eruptions.

4. *The End Triassic extinction* occurred approximately between 199 and 214 million years ago. This one seems to have been due to enormous lava eruptions in the central Atlantic region. This may have caused the breakup of Pangaea, the predecessor to our current continents and the creation of the Atlantic Ocean. Global warming may have been the primary cause of this extinction. "Rocks from the eruptions now are found in the eastern United States, eastern Brazil, North Africa and Spain. 22 percent of marine families, 52 percent of marine genera, and an unknown percentage of vertebrate deaths were the result."

5. *The Cretaceous-Tertiary (dinosaur) extinction* happened around 65 million years ago. It is proposed that this one was due to an "asteroid that created the Chicxulub crater now hidden on the Yucatan Peninsula and beneath the Gulf of Mexico." Another theory is that this mass extinction was due to slow climate shifts "or flood-like volcanic eruptions of basalt lava...in west-central India. During this extinction, 16 percent of marine families, 47 percent of marine genera, and 18 percent of land vertebrate families including the dinosaurs."

6. *The Sixth, the Human Extinction*, is now in progress, per Professor Norman Myers (Wikinews, web reference) and other scientists. Humans are directly causing or seriously contributing to the deaths of thousands of species each year. It is estimated that animals are being driven to extinction "100 to 1,000 times (possibly even 1,000 to 10,000 times) faster than at the normal background extinction rate, which is about 10 to 25 species per year." Humans are destroying natural habitats through human overpopulation, deforestation, agricultural monoculture, pesticides, herbicides, pollution (refuse, chemicals, nuclear), urban expansions, damming, diversion and exhaustion of water resources, transplanting non-resident species where they have no natural predators – where they decimate or displace local species, and climate change.

According to Wikinews (2006):

Environmental scientists say they have concrete evidence that the planet is undergoing the "largest mass extinction in 65 million years". Leading environmental scientist Professor Norman Myers says the Earth is experiencing its "Sixth Extinction."

Scientists forecast that up to five million species will be lost this century. "We are well into the opening phase of a mass extinction of species. There are about 10 million species on earth. If we carry on as we are, we could lose half of all those 10 million species," Myers said.

If we do not do more, Myers says, the planet will continue to lose around 50 species per day compared to the natural extinction rate of one species every five years. He projected this rate in the late 1980s to much criticism, but the figure is now widely accepted by scientists. "The whole thing is taking place in what you might call a flickering of an evolutionary eye," said Myers. "It's hard to keep up with unless we damp down on some of the causes of the evolution."

And the picture has been consistently getting worse. What is not taken into account is that with the loss of certain species, such as for example the bees, blossoms of 30-40 percent of trees and flowers will not be pollinated and this will lead to several precipitous worsenings of the extinctions.

Why is humanity suiciding – and genociding most of the other living beings on our planet?

It is a great puzzle to many why we are all putting up with the behaviors of those who are driving humanity like lemmings towards the edge of a precipice – and we are not mounting any serious efforts to stop them.

Much more attention has been given to the corporate greed that is so narrowly focused on immediate profits than to the fact that they are not considering the longer term effects of their behaviors. Governments have been taken over by corporate influence, again with an event horizon of just a few years till their next election. Worse, it is grossly evident that governments are being systematically corrupted through corporate financial contributions to politicians, who vote for policies favorable to these corporations – at the expense of the environment and of the welfare of every living being on our planet. And we, the 99%, are putting up with this. Why?

Having studied psychology and then having trained in psychiatry (when psychiatry was all about psychotherapy and not about medications), I've been puzzled by the psychological inability of humans to stop our march towards self-destruction. We seem absolutely determined as a species to insure that we commit suicide.

We persist in working towards ending our lives on this planet in incredible numbers and varieties of ways:

- Exhausting our natural resources
- Polluting our waters, land and air so that they are increasingly poisonous to ourselves and to most other life on our planet
- Overpopulation
- Genociding other species, with extinctions that are escalating at unconscionable rates – at our own peril in many cases, as with the extinction of bees needed for pollination
- Increasing carbon emissions that are causing global warming
- Building and continuing to run nuclear plants with no way to assure their safety or to safely dispose of spent nuclear fuel
- Engineering the weather with highly toxic sprays
- Waging useless wars on contrived pretenses that benefit the rich arms dealers and other suppliers of the military on the one hand, and that distract the public from the real problems in government at home on the other hand
- Allowing the concentration of resources into the hands of corporations and individuals who are obscenely rich – at the expense of the 99% of the rest of the population
- Allowing governments (prime example the US) to concentrate power increasingly in their own hands, with no oversight or controls by the public
- Allowing governments to make plans with event horizons of the next election, rather than following the precautionary principle of doing nothing that would jeopardize the welfare of at least the next seven generations

I was recently reminded of the story about the monkey trap, illustrated in the following video. A monkey can be lured to grab hold of a bit of food placed in a hole just wide enough for him to get his hand into. With his fist clenched tightly around the food, he is unable to pull his hand back through the hole. The hunter can then walk up to him and capture him.

[CLICK HERE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0cysJ5tOIQ) for YouTube <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x0cysJ5tOIQ>

Others have pondered this issue.

Jane Stillwater (web reference) points out:

- The Corporate world grasps the bait of “growth,” with the fallout of wars and nuclear threat
- Insurance companies grasp the bait of profits, with “American healthcare insurance companies can't let go of their bananas either, even though 335 Americans a DAY die because of their lust for unreasonable profits and their strangle-hold on America's doctors, nurses and hospitals.”
- Israel holds onto “The Occupation”
- Men, often justifying their behaviors under religious teachings, denying women access to education, jobs and freedom to participate in many of the benefits of their societies; “treating women as if they were mere property and/or objects of lust... Women make up half of the human race. Wherever women are treated as inferiors, we are wasting at least half of the human race's sorely-needed talents and capabilities.”

Clearly, humanity is no different from this monkey. All of us have grasped bits of the world around us and are holding tightly onto them, trapped by our own fears of letting go of these bits of reality and apparent security we are holding onto. And we hold onto these physical objects with the same tenacity as the monkey caught in the grasping trap. Similarly, we hold tenaciously to perceptions, concepts and beliefs – even when they trap us into self-destructive behaviors and outcomes.

This is a complex subject about which books and dissertations could be written, assuming this world survives long enough to see them completed and published! Let me share a few observations to help understand the human grasping trap.

Grasping material objects

The allure of physical possessions is compelling – particularly when we buy into the worldview that the measure of our success in life is to have attained a high income and as lavish a lifestyle as possible. The idols we worship are the highly paid stars of the media and sports arenas. The media are extremely creative and effective in self-promoting their values and in advertising the very latest style in shoes, communications devices and cars – which significantly enhance their box office profits.

While most of us in the (economically) developed world don't have every possible representative of the latest and ‘best’ commodity, we usually take pride and pleasure in possessing our current versions of our TV, cell phone and other modern conveniences. And we frequently look ‘up’ with envy at the 1% who have everything a person could wish, and ‘down’ on those who haven't achieved our levels of affluence.

We who enjoy the benefits of a western lifestyle have worked hard to obtain our material life enhancers and symbols of our successes. It would be hard for us to even think of making the sacrifices of letting any of these out of our grasp – which would be required if we are to begin to take on board how close we are to the edges of the many precipices listed above and to address them with the urgency they require.

In grasping the objects of desire that we in the western world hold in our possession, we ignore the enormous immediate costs to the rest of the world and the long-range costs to them and ourselves. The inequalities of western profligacy vs. the poverty of much of the rest of the world are striking. The Worldwatch Institute (Web reference) points out:

- The United States, with less than 5 % of the global population, uses about a quarter of the world's fossil fuel resources – burning up nearly 25 % of the coal, 26 % of the oil, and 27 % of the world's natural gas.
- As many as 2.8 billion people on the planet struggle to survive on less than \$2 a day, and more than one billion people lack reasonable access to safe drinking water.

- The U.N. reports that 825 million people are still undernourished; the average person in the industrial world took in 10 percent more calories daily in 1961 than the average person in the developing world consumes today.

Greed, addiction to more-ism and selfishness: Fear of not having or being enough and lust for having more to hold onto

Greed is an addiction to wanting ever more possessions. It is accompanied by feeling a need to own and hold onto ever more of whatever a person values. Money is the classic object of greed.

As in all people with addictions, we often find in greedy people:

- An underlying sense of inadequacy, leading to cravings for something that makes the addicts feel better
- Depression that is unrecognized and unacknowledged, assuaged temporarily by satisfying the cravings, but never properly addressed and cleared
- Lack of conscious awareness of their psychological issues and psychological defenses against these issues
- Strong tendencies to blame others for the greedy person's problems

Greed is also an expression of selfishness, and a monkey trap in which people are forever grasping for more possessions, often at the expense of 'others.' This, in turn, is often a result of feeling separate from those being taken advantage of and of being insensitive or uncaring about their situation and feelings.

Americans are known to people of other countries as woefully ignorant about any country other than their own. This cultural myopia fosters a selfish, unbridled exploitation of other countries' resources, enabling a US-initiated, and insanely hyped and promoted lifestyle that is globally unjustifiable and that very frequently leaves the exploited countries impoverished.

Fortunately, the internet opens up windows of communications and awarenesses that can broaden our perceptions and awarenesses of what is happening on our planet. Here are just a few motes of information to illustrate global realities worth pondering:

- People in other cultures

For BBC MOTION GALLERY- WORLD CULTURE SHOWREEL – [CLICK HERE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBxZommbxvE)
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aBxZommbxvE>

- Global economic realities

For a film about the hunger and poverty brought about by Globalization [CLICK HERE](http://www.cultureunplugged.com/play/1081/Chicken-a-la-Carte)
<http://www.cultureunplugged.com/play/1081/Chicken-a-la-Carte>

There are 10,000 people dying everyday due to hunger and malnutrition. This short film shows a forgotten portion of the society. The people who live on the refuse of men to survive. What is inspiring is the hope and spirituality that never left this people

- Global heating realities – One of the best, condensed explanations of multiple factors drawing us to (hopefully not yet past) a tipping point that is beyond reversal.

[CLICK HERE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5T_3WJPYY9g) for a very insightful discussion (12 min.)
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5T_3WJPYY9g

- Opportunities for global wholistic healings

[The Social Network for Sustainability http://wiser.org](http://wiser.org) :

Our mission is to help the global movement of people and organizations working toward social justice, indigenous rights, and environmental stewardship to connect, collaborate, share knowledge, and build alliances.

Power: Grasping after and holding onto control over 'others'

Power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

- Lord Acton

The modern world is based on economic competition. In part this is for control over limited resources. But deeper psychological motives contribute to this form of grasping and not letting go.

Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives - the power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change – truly are powerless, because they cannot think new thoughts.

– Salman Rushdie

These perspectives are often fostered by those in power who want to distract people from problems at home. This is condensed in one of my favorite quotes, from an unknown source (despite being attributed to Julius Caesar).

Beware the leader who bangs the drums of war in order to whip the citizenry into a patriotic fervor, for patriotism is indeed a double-edged sword. It both emboldens the blood, just as it narrows the mind.

And when the drums of war have reached a fever pitch and the blood boils with hate and the mind has closed, the leader will have no need in seizing the rights of the citizenry. Rather, the citizenry, infused with fear and blinded by patriotism, will offer up all of their rights unto the leader and gladly so.

How do I know? For this is what I have done. And I am Caesar.

And wars are among the worst expressions of the uses of power turning into abuses of power. There are many examples of more subtle manipulations of those in power. Take, for instance, the information filtering on the internet that presents selected links in response to web searches – with the selections made by anonymous cyberspace censors who presume to know what your best choices and mine should be. Eli Pariser warns that this can pose a danger to our democracy (that is already challenged and threatened in so many ways).

Beware of online filter bubbles

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B8ofWfx525s>

Starhawk helps us to see the value of power used in ethical and healing ways. She has been an advocate and activist promoting earth-based spirituality for over three decades. She teaches personal awareness, community renewal and global transformation.

Starhawk distinguishes three types of power: "power-over," referring to domination and control; "power-from-within," meaning personal ability and spiritual integrity; and "power-with," pertaining to social power or influence among equals. (Starhawk, New York Times book review, 1988)

David Hawkins (2002) uses a different vocabulary for similar observations. He says that 'force' is the use by individuals or groups of physical or psychological means of coercion to achieve their ends at the expense of others. Power is the manifestation of Spirit in the world through the *presence* of people at higher levels of development. When living and functioning is a state of spiritual power, our goals are to act in ethical, healing ways. Satisfactions achieved in this state of beingness lead to very different outcomes from those achieved through force. "Whereas power always results in a win-win situation; force produces win-lose situations..." (p. 167)

Short-sightedness in holding onto what we have in our hands

Political power is a terrible monkey trap. Chris Nelder (web reference), focusing on declining fossil fuel resources and carbon emissions, suggests that humans focus much more readily on the present than on the future. While this is true of individuals, it is far more true of politicians – whose event horizons extend only to the next election date. They fear being judged harshly for budget deficits. Investments in the long-term projects that are required to address each of humanity's serious problems show up as a negative balance in short-term budgets. So such items are for the most part ignored.

Jared Diamond, in *Collapse*, his New York Times bestseller, reviews a spectrum of societies who grasped and completely exploited the natural resources available in their environment. This worked to the advantage of those generations who had access to the trees, topsoil and water that nature provided. But when they only grasped that which was freely available and failed to husband and renew these resources, the next generations starved or died out because of overpopulation and periodic droughts or other climate shifts.

Holding onto old beliefs and practices vs. grasping new awarenesses

Doubting everything or believing everything are two equally convenient solutions, both of which save us from thinking.

- Jules Henri Poincaré

There are many layers to habitual ways of perceiving, interpreting and interacting with our world. These are acquired over our lifetime – from family, friends, community, media, books and multitudes of life experiences. These too may be very difficult for us to let go of – even when there are major changes in our environment and our life situations.

While logic suggests that scientific evidence ought to prevail against contrary beliefs, this does not appear to be the case. A recent study shows that confronting people with research that contradicts their political beliefs actually tends to strengthen their beliefs (Kahn, et al. web reference; Kaplan, web reference).

Religious leaders have also used the teachings of exclusivity to create separations between 'us' and 'others' that justify selfish, cruel and even murderous behaviors towards those outside the fold. These teachings, too, are held tenaciously by many.

Admitting we may be wrong is a problem. Few people are flexible enough to accept that their on-board neuro-computer programs may contain errors. Research consistently demonstrates we make frequent errors in our perceptions, memory, beliefs and reasoning processes. One of the worst problems in the context of this discussion is the reluctance of most people to consider, much less to admit, that they may be wrong in their beliefs (Schulz, 2010).

Even after accepting we are wrong, releasing old beliefs and exploring and accepting new ones is a fraught process. When we deviate in significant ways from the beliefs of our family, friends, co-workers, religious communities and culture, we often expose ourselves to criticisms, censure and ostracism. With major changes in beliefs, we may have to change our friends and communities in order to be ourselves more fully.

There are three things I have learned never to discuss with people: religion, politics, and the Great Pumpkin.

- Charlie Brown (Charles M Schulz)

In small matters it is an individual decision. In larger matters, it becomes a family, social group, community, national or global decision. The larger the groups involved, the more difficult and challenging the process of change can be.

The examples of the Suffragettes in the UK and US is a good example. Women were second class citizens until well into the early part of the 20th century. They could not vote or hold title to property. It was only after decades of public demonstrations and protests, in many cases leading to serious challenges, including incarcerations, that laws were changed to grant them these rights. This culminated "in 1920 with the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution, which provided: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex" (Wikipedia)

This becomes increasingly difficult when it crosses the borders of single countries, to involve different cultures.

The example of Ghandi starts to touch on this, as he led the movement to free India from the rule of Britain in the a940s. the most relevant and important aspect of Ghandi's movement to independence is that it was achieved through the actions of people of all classes.

With the major challenges facing humanity, including the very survival of all life on our planet as we know it today, we are clearly facing the greatest, most difficult changes and challenges humanity has ever known.

Transformation today

*What the caterpillar calls the end of the world
The master calls a butterfly.*

- Richard Bach

Reason alone is a very slow road to changing established beliefs, opinions and behaviors. We simply don't have the time to wait for gradual shifts of awareness and opinion to coalesce into corrective, healing actions to halt dangerous processes listed above and reverse the damages already done and in progress.

Those who are in charge will not let go of their gold coins and diamonds and financial manipulations in the monkey traps of monetary gain and profits. This is the 1% comprised of corporate leaders who pull the reins and hold out the carrots of bribes and perks to keep politicians on courses of self-interest and self-gain that are so utterly destructive to our planet.

The change will either come from the 99% of people or it will not happen.

Llewellyn Vaughan-Lee describes the journey from the place of human stuckness to the interconnectedness with all beings on our planet, in a wonderful book called *Spiritual Ecology* (see review in this issue of IJHC).

This is "...a journey one we must make now, from our soulless, materialistic wasteland to a land rich in meaning and sacred purpose, which knows the name and place of all of its myriad inhabitants. On this side, where our world stands now, we each live our separate lives, isolated within our individual, anxious self. On the other side, we feel the patterns of interrelationship that support and nourish us, and can commune together as a single living community; we feel the mystery and magic of a world full of sacred meaning and purpose. It is only when we stand on this other shore that we can hope to heal our world, to help it to become free of this nightmare of materialism that is destroying its fragile and magical beauty. (p. iii)

What are you doing to make it happen? If you're not part of the solution, you are part of the problem.

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