

Americans: Protect environmental china shop

By Karen Telleen-Lawton

A recent poll showing Americans' increasing concern for the environment confirmed a hunch of mine.

President Bush's hard line for business at the expense of the environment is inspiring a Renaissance of interest in protecting our global neighborhood. Only 2 percent of Americans viewed environmental issues as the most important problem facing the nation in 1998, but now that figure is 13 percent.

Whether the issue is arsenic in water, carbon dioxide in the air, or drilling in sensitive ecosystems, people are coming to realize how invasive we can be, even inadvertently.

An early-morning bird watch in the Huntington Botanical Gardens underscored for me humans' pervasive effect.

Our guide explained that to insure her progeny will be successful in diverse environments, a female mockingbird's genes predispose her to choose a well-traveled mate. Males demonstrate their cosmopolitan ways by singing tunes they have gathered in their travels. More songs represent more travels, so mockingbird males amass dozens of melodies

to woo their sweethearts. Returning home, I listened more attentively to our neighborhood mockingbird.

My first surprise was that he sang thirty-five tunes before a repeat. But then I recognized one particular series that was harsh, brassy, and irritating: Caw! caw! caw! caw! oom-PAW oom-PAW oom-PAW oom-PAW oom-PAW WAA WAA WAA WAA! TAH-woo TAH-woo TAH-woo TAH-woo! He was mimicking a car alarm, one that I heard often from the shopping district down the street.

The mechanical melody reminded me that the live things in my yard evolve generation by generation to live among the behemoth that is the human species. The success of Earth's current inhabitants has been their ability to evolve with the changing environment and with each other. It is an uneven process, with the more social and flexible species surviving or even thriving in the increasing sprawl of human life, learning to get along with us.

The shy species retreat further or disappear along with the evaporating wilderness habitat. Scientists estimate that the extinction rate has increased between 100- to 1,000-fold since humans' rise.

For California bears, bald eagles, salmon and countless other plants and animals, we have proved to be Earth's bull-in-a-china-shop species. Our history is replete with episodes like planting Russian olives that choke out native riparian trees, importing exotic fish in ship ballasts that attack native species already reeling from over-fishing and pollution, and designing pest-proof crops which prove fatal to benign butterflies.

In this generation, we are coming to realize how much people-pressure has altered or endangered the future of other species, however unintentionally. The poll found that 50 percent of Americans believe the environment should take priority over the economy if they conflict, while a slimmer 38 percent say that prerogative belongs to the economy.

As individuals, in businesses, and with our governments, we can cooperate to step more lightly on the Earth. There aren't really many trade-offs, since in the long run what's best for the environment is best for the economy. If we want our china shop to stay in business, we'd best tame the bull.

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