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4-12-2017

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### STARS Citation

Vink, Nathan, "The Earth Does Not Need Us, but We Most Certainly Need a Healthy Planet" (2017). *UCF Forum*. 249.

<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/ucf-forum/249>

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# The Earth Does Not Need Us, but We Most Certainly Need a Healthy Planet

By Nathan Vink  
UCF Forum columnist  
Wednesday, April 12, 2017

A few weeks ago I stood at Yaki Point on the edge of the Grand Canyon watching the sunset. A cold desert wind rushed up the cliff sides, sucking the last remaining heat from the sandstone below. The rustle of pinyons and junipers gave sound to the silence of the setting sun.

I was almost left breathless by the enormity of the space in front of me as I looked at each layer of sandstone, limestone and shale below representing a massive span of time in the history earth, all the while the sky was painted multiple shades of orange, purple and red. In a sense, my mind was blown.

On the bus back to camp, I spoke with a friend and asked her about her experience. She talked about how insignificant she felt and how the immensity of the open space made her feel small. She likened the feeling to when she looked across an ocean or up at a night sky full of stars.

I asked if she would describe the feeling as a sense of awe, and she agreed.

The feeling of awe is defined as an overwhelming feeling created by something grand. This feeling is so intense that studies have shown the feeling of awe can increase compassion and ethical decision-making within people. This feeling promotes positive discussion, as many look to process the experience for understanding.

For me, these moments are memories that stand the test of time, from standing on a mountain summit while three massive wildfires rage in the distance, to lying in the sand watching the sun set on an uninhabited island in the Bahamas. These types of deep sensory immersions have drawn me closer and closer to the natural world.

I have experienced enough of this feeling to know that it is in fact not my own insignificance that I'm being shown but my connection to these awe-inspiring places and my connection to nature.

We learn to block out the natural world around us as we move through our daily lives, rarely taking the time to notice the brilliant red of a cardinal or movement of the clouds. We are sometimes taught to find awe in the power we have over our planet, the power to harness rivers, to extract fossil fuels and to have a dominance over all other species.

While the feats of humankind have brought me to a sense of awe as well, the idea of something that happened in nature – just a straight line, a unique shape or a perfect angle – brings me back again and again.

I find this to be the great motivator when it comes to my ethics around conservation. With climate change and conservation, many feel overwhelmed when asking, “What can I do?” Recycling, vehicle emissions, water conservation, power sources and wildlife advocacy are all areas of need, but with so much needed, how can one “insignificant” person make a difference?

Whether it’s to preserve these feelings for yourself or others, or a deeper connection with the natural space around you, my advice is to pick something and make it yours. Continue to do the “small” things, such as recycling, using efficient light bulbs and using less water, but also take on a project that means something to you, that calls to you.

Take wildlife conservation, for example.

The Endangered Species Act of 1973 has contributed greatly to helping many species back from the brink of extinction, including bald eagles, gray wolves and most recently manatees, which were taken off the endangered list and placed on the threatened list. The act has recently come under attack by some as constricting businesses from operating due to conflicts with practices that affect endangered species and their habitats. Large areas of land and waterways are protected from development and pollution due to the habitats they provide from protected species.

Scaling back this act or removing species off the list prematurely could roll back the hard work of many and the impact it has had on many species. Regarding manatees, some believe this is a premature move that could endanger manatees more, as boats colliding with manatees are still a significant issue that hasn’t been fully addressed. For those wanting to help, the Humane Society of the United States is a good place to start.

In regards to river and water conservation, the Oroville Dam failure in California – where a concrete spillway collapsed earlier this year – brought to light the significant need to take a closer look at dams in our country. From infrastructure concerns to habitat destruction, the building of dams has come with headaches. While obviously not all dams are bad and at times serve a significant role in the livelihoods of many, others have lost their beneficial meaning and now stand to create more harm than good. As climate change continues, studies show many dams are not ready to take on the extreme weather patterns that are to come, with the Oroville Dam as a prime example. If this is an interest, American Rivers, a national advocacy group, focuses on this subject.

Now more than ever it is necessary to continue the philosophical shift from the idea of saving the planet toward the idea of preserving the human race through harmony with the natural world. It is not that we just are hurting the planet, but that we are inflicting damage to ourselves by ignoring the warning signs. When you look at the earth as an organism, you can see the idea that the earth will treat something that hurts it like a virus; it will do what is necessary to eradicate that which is trying to hurt it.

As severe weather becomes more and more extreme, water levels rise and temperatures climb, these are warning signs of overreach and discourse. The earth does not need us, but we most certainly need a healthy planet. It's not just the idea that our planet is bigger, stronger and more complex than us, but that the natural world and we are one.

While we as individuals are a small cog in a larger instrument, we are still an integral piece, and how we come together in harmony with the natural world will create the blueprint for what the future holds.

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