



## President's Note

**H**umans have been around for less than seven seconds, if we compare our planet's existence to a 24-hour day—*Homo sapiens* evolved less than 350,000 years ago, and the earth is about 4.5 billion years old.

Even though we just came on the scene, we act like undisputed rulers of the world—conveniently overlooking the fact that humans can be undone by infinitesimal viruses. We'd do well to remember that of nine known human species we're the last one left.

Each of us is a metaphorical biological RV since the typical person houses some 39 trillion microorganisms including bacteria, viruses, and fungi. A recent meme asserts that plants are actually farming us—not the other way around—since they provide oxygen so that, when we die and decompose, they can feed on our remains. Often, our elaborate funerary internments go to great lengths to disrupt this natural process.

Each day we trample this precious planet with utter disregard, even contempt, for immutable laws of nature. Given this folly, what are the odds our species will get to that eighth second by still being around in the year 50,000 CE?

To be sure, we're great at building stuff, be it useful or nonsensical. But at what cost? Over the past 50 years, human population has more than doubled while we've annihilated 69 percent of mammals, birds, fish, and reptiles during that brief period, according to the World Wildlife Fund.

In a best-case scenario, we might accelerate the use of renewable energy and stop using fossil fuels within decades. But will that curb our ravenous overconsumption? Or will we continue to treat the natural world as if it is disposable, when it's essential to life in all its forms—including our own recently evolved species?

Imagine for a moment a world with, say, just 12 percent of its current population—or one billion people. Would it be terrible if we shrunk to that level—or even lower—by choosing smaller families? It would take at least several centuries, during which life patterns would shift significantly, but there is nothing new about dramatic change.

We'd be back to where we were around 1800 in terms of our numbers, but with all people able to have immensely rich lives in the deepest sense of the word. What could be better than a world in which people everywhere could lead healthy, productive lives and enjoy the abundance of a flourishing natural world without recourse to heedless plunder?

As for the economy, markets would adapt just as they've adapted in the past. Keep in mind that the five biggest companies in the U.S. today didn't even exist 50 years ago. The largest one (Apple) is part of an industry that, for all practical purposes, came into existence around then. Change happens, regardless. But what sort? And at what cost?

Speaking of cost, achieving smaller families is about as inexpensive as it gets. According to the Guttmacher Institute, modest investments could slash unintended pregnancies in the poorest places on earth by 68 percent. Here at home, those in need of reproductive health services must navigate a bewildering array of programs. Even worse, many states are enacting ever more barriers to contraception and safe abortion at a time when there are about 1.4 million unintended births in the U.S. annually.

Only time will tell if our own species will have any staying power. By shrinking our numbers and respecting both the laws of nature and limits to growth, we might yet be able to stick around for a while and enjoy the simple abundance of life on this small planet.

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