



Work of the Research Fellows

One Hundred Meters Squared

Michael D'Alco

"It is faster to walk than it is to take the train."
— Henry David Thoreau

"It is faster to hitchhike to Stockholm than it is to take the bus."
— Amanda and Anatoli

A number of years ago I began to take a serious look at global environmental issues. The largest and most pressing of these issues is clearly the question of global warming or climate change. I became convinced that this issue is not driven by a correct understanding of the scientific issues but is, instead, driven by an incorrect view of the role of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. One of the key elements of this analysis was the discovery that warming created in large cities alone may be sufficient to account for all of the warming observed in the historical temperature data for any particular city.¹ This analysis results in the conclusion that we may not have a global warming issue, but, instead, a local and regional issue that is independent of the type of fuel used.

While presenting a two-week course on environmental issues to a group of young adults in Järna, Sweden, recently, I thought about how each human being affects the earth as a whole. I became curious about how much land is available to each human being, assuming that each human on the earth has an equal area of land. The result surprised me. Presently, there are approximately 7 billion people on this planet. Knowing that population is still growing, I decided to use a population of 8 billion to plan a bit for the future. Taking the diameter of the earth as 7,915 miles, I quickly calculated the surface area of the earth. When we take the surface area of the earth, remove the

71% covered by water and reduce that land by 50% to account for frozen land masses and deserts, the resulting area of land available to each human being is approximately an area 109 yards by 109 yards or approximately 100 meters square.² That's it—the length of a football field by the length of a football field per human being.

Everything that you need or value in the world has to be supported by human beings' abilities to work harmoniously with a piece of the earth roughly that size. Your food, water, clothing, shelter, transportation, energy, entertainment... you get the picture. Technically, you also have a piece of desert or chunk of ice the same size, as well as a piece of the ocean about four times this size, but, in essence, your life is supported by, at most, a couple of hundred meters squared. Surely, such a fact implies the possibility of a new means of looking at environmental and social issues.

Our present industrial lifestyle is only possible through the glaring imbalances of land use that affluent (even modestly affluent) people of the western hemisphere—roughly speaking—have with respect to the average person in the world. We know that the world is simply not large enough for each person to live as an affluent Westerner, each with his or her own gasoline-powered vehicle and a current American commute.

Unless we intend to begin the process of deciding who is on and who is off—a "real reality" version of *Survivor*—or unless we accept the dire consequences of our unconscious continuation of the way things are, a new look at environmental issues is required.

For a number of years I have been interested in the artwork of traditional cultures. This interest includes the cultures of Tibet, Kham, Mongolia, the Pacific Northwest, the Inuit, the traditional

62 · Work of the Research Fellows

culture of the mountains of Austria, and, recently, the Sami people of Sweden. When looking at their artwork, I am immediately struck by how little work there is and also the similarities—and differences—among cultures in style and intention. Each piece generally has a function in daily life (it is not “art for art’s sake”) and has been made beautiful because it is, in fact, one of its user’s only possessions. A short list of such items may include a knife, a needle case, a pouch for flint and steel, a bowl or spoon, clothing, boots, and a hat. Except for our clothing, the closest we come to such items in the West are a cell phone, keys, and a credit card.

Traditional people are frequently nomadic. Most of what they need is on their bodies at all times. As nomadic people, they move easily; when one area of their land becomes overused, they move on and let the earth heal and return to a natural balance. These people know every aspect of the earth and its rhythms. Their life not only depends on natural rhythms; their life is one of these rhythms.

If each human life depends on land roughly 100 meters by 100 meters, it is no longer possible for human beings simply to move from a place on the earth that they have just worn out to another place. We would simply be moving into another human being’s “worn out” place. We require a new level of consciousness and a new means of working harmoniously with the earth.

It is possible for every human being to live on the earth supported by an area of land 100 meters by 100 meters if every human being recognizes the necessity, takes the opportunity, and assumes the daily responsibility to develop a relationship with a piece of the earth. Such a relationship will be as different for each piece of the earth as each human being is different from another. Such work requires great sensitivity in reading patterns and establishing relationships with the land, as practiced intuitively for centuries by traditional people. This work also requires the great imagination, ingenuity, and creativity that have developed in supporting our modern ways of life.

To make such a relationship with the earth a reality, we must educate human beings who are keen observers of subtle patterns in their surroundings (think: phenomenological science meets a native dowser or shaman). Here, the ability to

see what the land needs in order to become more balanced is combined with the patterns and resources already present (think: biodynamic agriculture meets the eye of the hunter). Here, every human creation is functional, beautiful, and integrated into the harmony of the local environment (think: practical and fine arts meet traditional indigenous crafts). Here, everyone will have a relationship with a neighbor so that understanding another human being and her task will become as important as understanding our relationship with the earth (think: the best of Western culture meets the wisdom of generations handed down by indigenous elders).

The opportunity is here, now. What will you do with the 100 meters by 100 meters for which you are responsible?³ The world awaits your answer.

Endnotes

1. Nordell, Bo. “Global Warming Is Large-Scale Thermal Energy Storage,” in *Thermal Energy Storage for Sustainable Energy Consumption*, Halime Ö Paksoy, ed. Springer Netherlands, 2007. An abstract may be found at <http://www.springerlink.com/content/wkv36rxuu4561912/>.
2. You may have slightly more land than this estimate—about 30% of the earth’s land is ice or desert; on the other hand, only about 13% is arable.
3. An area a bit less than 2.5 acres.

Deepest thanks to Amanda and Anatoli, students whom I was teaching recently in Sweden who took me to Stockholm one Saturday afternoon to see the art of the Sami. We didn’t take the train, we hitchhiked—it was faster.