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The War on the Planet

by KIRKPATRICK SALE

JANUARY 09, 2014

Some recent evidence in the contest between capitalism and the earth:

In October, the U.S. officially edged past Russia as the world's largest producer of oil and gas, an achievement largely due to the great increase in natural gas production through hydraulic fracturing of shale (fracking). Inasmuch as the process puts into the ground (and groundwater) 40 gallons of up to 600 chemicals in every well, no one doubts that it is one of the dirtiest and most polluting industries ever created.

Capitalism 1, Earth 0.

In December, the New England shrimp fishery was officially shut down for at least a year, maybe three, to allow a restoration of vastly depleted shrimp stocks, now at historic lows due to overfishing and warmer waters. Shrimpers made \$10 million two years ago, just \$1.2 million this year, and it is uncertain if or when the stocks will come back.

Capitalism 2, Earth 0.

According to a UN report in December , climate-change gasses in the atmosphere set a record high in 2012. The U.N. World Meteorological Organization said warming gasses increased 32 per cent 1990 to 2012, with Co2, industrialization's chief byproduct, accounting for 80 per cent of that.

Capitalism 3, Earth 0.

Polar bear populations are shrinking everywhere in the Arctic, a September 2013 report found, as sea ice shrank to the lowest extent since records began in 1979. The shrinking ice means an increase in open water (in some places an area the size of Texas), thus limiting bears' access to seals, their prime source of food.

Capitalism 4, Earth 0.

In August, President Rafael Correa of Ecuador abandoned a plan hatched in 2007 to save the Yasuni National Park in the Amazon from underground oil drilling through an international agreement to supply the country \$3.6 billion over 13 years, half the cash value of the potential oil. After six years, only \$13 million had been pledged, one-half of one per cent of the agreed sum.

Capitalism 5, Earth 0.

And so it goes. Don't doubt that I could fill up another dozen pages this way, picking only the most glaring examples of humankind's failure to protect and preserve the only known habitat on which it is known to be able to survive. And I have not mentioned the extinction of species, the destruction of ecosystems, the pollution of waters and soils, the elimination of forests, the spread of deserts, and the alteration of climate. The Ecosystem Millennium Assessment in 2005 put it simply: "Human activity is putting such a strain on the natural functions of Earth that the ability of the planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted."

And let us understand that "human activity" is essentially state-supported industrial capitalism and its offshoots and imitators, as practiced now on a global scale and at a never-ending pace, with technology of unprecedented power and destructiveness.

I made a somewhat-famous \$1,000 bet in 1995 (see hanson.gmu.edu/press/wired-5-02) that Western civilization would collapse in all important economic and political ways in 2020, so I

cannot say I am really surprised at the recent accounting of who is winning the battle for survival. What I suppose I'm most surprised about is those who don't understand what this battle is all about and continue to demand, plead, organize, and urge that things be different. Paul Ehrlich, for example, in a recent blog on the website of the Millennium Alliance for Humanity and the Biosphere, called for scientists to "quickly generate a global ethical movement agreeing to change human actions for the benefit of our descendants." (Descendants? the good capitalist says. What have they done for me lately?)

Things can't be different—that must be understood. The way things are is the bargain we made as a society when we decided on a system dependent on unlimited growth (not to mention on all the seven deadly sins but sloth) and as much exploitation of natural resources for human betterment as fast and as extensively as possible. ("Exploit," after all, in the language of this system, is a positive word, as so is "growth.") It has in a sense upheld its end of the bargain, for it has produced an abundance of things ("goods" doesn't quite seem the right word) and processes that have benefited a great many people over a great many years, never mind their inequitable distribution and impact. Yes, overpopulation, overproduction, and overconsumption have wrought a terrible price, but after all that's what capitalism has always been based upon, and in the short term many prosper and a few grow very rich.

(I am reminded of a story told by Friederich Engels when he visited early industrial England and made some comment on the river of Manchester, "a coal-black, foul-smelling stream, full of debris and refuse," and remarked to a leading manufacturer that he had never seen so ill-built and filthy a city: "The man listened quietly to the end, and said at the corner where we parted; 'And yet there is a great deal of money made here; good morning, sir.'")

Obviously I can't say when the contest will end, though I have to say 2020 doesn't seem like such a far-fetched date. I can only describe for you the nature of the contest, and who is winning.