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FISH BAY REFLECTIONS

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Respecting Life as a Whole

Although I have very little formal scientific training, my work as an environmental lawyer has often involved highly technical issues. In many cases I have worked closely with scientists when the goal has been to evaluate the extent of environmental damage that has already occurred and then to design mitigation strategies.

Scientific documentation is also invaluable when you need to present convincing evidence of specific environmental impacts. But, unfortunately, there are often few remedies available once the damage has been done. Prevention of harm would make a lot more sense.

However, the scientific approach to the natural world does not seem to be sufficient when the objective is to prevent environmental damage from occurring. Despite a growing appreciation of the complex interactions among natural systems, many scientists concentrate on isolated components of nature, sometimes viewing them in a mechanistic way. The effect can be a fragmented and compartmentalized world view.

I am beginning to think that a more spiritual approach is required – one that relies less on documenting harm that has already been done and more on promoting respect for the land, and water, and for the other life forms that share the earth with us. Modern science has produced an unprecedented wealth of information. Yet that information has not generally been applied within a framework of concern for the earth, or for other lives.

Over the years of human history, practical applications derived from scientific research have played a key role in economic and political developments. They have given some groups of people the ability to have major impacts on other cultures, and on the natural world itself. Processes of industrialization and economic expansion based on science and engineering have brought wealth and comfort to many people. They have also vastly accelerated global environmental damage, including land and water pollution, destruction of fragile ecosystems, extinction of species, and interference with the earth's atmosphere.

We now have very sophisticated equipment to measure levels of contaminants in soil and water, or rates of greenhouse gas emissions, or increases in the hole in the ozone layer. And still we continue to pollute. We can counter many environmental impacts by applying scientific

methods to minimize or eliminate sources of pollution, but that is not likely to happen effectively unless we accept a different level of responsibility for life on earth.

With increasing globalization, indigenous cultures, as well as their lands, have also been lost. Many formerly remote places have become subject to large-scale mining, forestry and agricultural operations – or opened up for tourism. These economic activities have changed the traditional relationships between people and the land, especially when short-term exploitation by outsiders has led to deforestation, desertification, and toxic pollution, often without providing substantial benefits to the people living in a place.

Indigenous cultures may have lacked a great deal of scientific information and technological sophistication, but they generally have held a more respectful view of the earth. Some have believed that the land is sacred and that there are spirits in other life forms as well as non-living things.

I recently read a statement by Te Rua Winiata, a Maori woman from New Zealand, which described a holistic rather than a reductionist perspective on the world:

“There is a recognition of the relationship between the earth and the sky and all that comes between. I learn how I am part of the whole. Therefore I can say I belong to the earth. I do not own the land nor do I have dominion over the land. I understand that my relationship with creation means that I have a responsibility to the earth which provides me with the resources I need for life. To needlessly destroy or take more than my share of the resources is to walk the path of self-destruction.”

On this island the indigenous inhabitants were completely eliminated within a few decades after Columbus first appeared. The Spanish easily overwhelmed them with more advanced technology, in the form of ships and guns and steel weapons. The land was eventually stripped for plantations and people from Africa were enslaved to grow sugar for the palates of Europe. But not everything was destroyed. Despite its radical transformation since pre-Columbian days, many of the natural features of St. John are much the same.

The National Park Service now works to preserve, and even restore, some of the land and surrounding reefs. A number of scientists come here to do research, accumulating information that is critical for understanding causes and solutions for environmental damage. Obtaining that scientific information will not be sufficient, however, for conservation purposes.

We are learning more and more about the components of life, even down to the patterns of our own DNA. Yet we will continue to lose much of the richness of our diverse world if we do not take a broader view of our responsibilities. Parts of nature can't be saved unless there is an overall respect for the whole of life.