

# Urgent: Dreams

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**Abstract** People of the twenty-first century urgently require new ways of envisioning Earth and humanity's uncertainly unfolding future in order to live in ways that do not further exacerbate the environmental crisis. The fragmented environmental community is responsible for pulling together to help do so. Mature hope requires the cooperation of all the academic environmental disciplines and beyond to engage in intelligent, loving, and creative research and utopian storytelling. This paper discusses obstacles to that endeavor. It also suggests three elements to help frame fresh, diverse dreams of land health and human happiness at once emerging from and returning to real places, the real Earth.

**Keywords** “Land health” · Storytelling · Utopian imagination · Earth · “Mental geography”

The twentieth century American conservation writer Aldo Leopold had a dream. It was a vision of people and nature living in ways mutually beneficial to each other. It was an ideal that encompassed the interdependent well-being of all life forms. Leopold called his vision “land health.” It was grounded in a “symbol of land”—the biotic pyramid—that represented Earth's ecological and evolutionary realities (Leopold 1939). Leopold's vision combined with those realities implied that certain ways of using land were better than others. Embedding people within the land pyramid situated them not merely in a physical actuality, but in a

moral community, including soils, waters, plants, and animals. “A thing,” in his words, was “right” if it preserved the “integrity, stability, and beauty” of this community, if, in other words, it promoted “land health” (Leopold 1946a; Leopold 1949; Warren 2006). Into the second decade of the twenty-first century, the world is more turned away from this dream of humans and nature living in concert than ever. As a result, it has become increasingly clear that Earth has entered what some are calling the “Anthropocene” (Crutzen 2000). This is the current geological epoch in which the whole planet is shaped by humans.

The twenty-first century environmental author and climate change activist Bill McKibben felt this in 1989 when he published *The End of Nature*, writing: “Instead of a world where rain had an independent and mysterious existence the rain had become a subset of human activity” (McKibben 2006). Countering humanity's now-dominating life ways, McKibben, like Leopold did, continues to dream. Embracing Leopold's earlier hopes, McKibben's vision, too, is of people and nature living in ways mutually beneficial to each other. His is also an ideal that encompasses the interdependent well-being of all life forms. McKibben now calls his vision “350” (McKibben 2011; see 350.org), which represents the highest life-as-we-have-known-it “safe” limit of parts-per-million carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. McKibben's hope is grounded in the realities of matter, physics, and chemistry, which first formed the universe, its stars, and our planet. He understands that these realities impose upon us some better ways of using nature than others. The vision of 350, for example, links Leopold's earlier understandings of land health even more explicitly with the prudential and moral call for humans to cease digging up and burning fossil fuels—those ancient stores of plant and animal bodies.

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Both Leopold and McKibben are dreaming realists. Leopold did not believe that unlimited industrial development was reconcilable with his vision. Nor did he believe that the needed ethic limiting its application was likely to become widespread among members of industrialized culture before more harm was done (Warren 2006). “That the situation is hopeless,” wrote Leopold to his good friend Bill Vogt, “should not prevent us from doing our best” (Leopold 1946b). That is, a world of loss does not necessarily leave us bereft of hope, but it sobers us. Just as gravely, but with even more urgency 60 years later, McKibben writes: “It remains to be seen whether the intellectual scaffold provided by environmentalism for the last 100 years is anywhere near sturdy enough to deal with the weight of the problems we’re now piling on top of it” (McKibben 2009). Presently, there are approximately 390 ppm of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and rising. We are already on the life-as-we-have-never-known-it side of McKibben’s vision. “We no longer live on planet Earth because of how humans have changed it,” he explains: “It’s a different place. A different planet. It needs a new name. Eearth” (McKibben 2010). Within this planet, we urgently need new ways of understanding what “doing our best” is, morally and intellectually. We cannot afford to be prevented from doing it. The tide eventually may be turned.

Those concerned about land health, facing reality responsibly, must bring together truth with desire in order to go on with mature hope. Such hope may be constructed in utopian imaginations—literary and philosophical. “A world without utopian longings is forlorn,” wrote historian Russell Jacoby (2005). Most, if not all, ancient to modern cultures contain utopian concepts, indicating that they may be part of being human (Sargent 2010). Emerging out of and returning to their contemporary situations, they involve variations of a better world (Claeys 2011). At their best, utopian constructs do not bind but create free mental spaces in which to work out critical thought experiments. Given that how we think translates into action, they may function as compasses, helping to point us in directions we imagine we want to go (Mumford 1922). Utopian dreaming often historically has functioned dialectically, potentially catalyzing social change in practice. That is, people become dissatisfied with things as they are. To counter this, the discontents dream up fresh conceptions of living. When these become stale, unworkable, or even harmful, they are later challenged by others and so on. “Utopia is a tragic vision of a life of hope,” writes utopian scholar Lyman Tower Sargent. “We can,” he continues, “hope, fail, and hope again” (Sargent 2010). We can, that is, as long as Earth is livable.

Figuring out where humanity has failed to promote a world good to live in and hoping again is necessary if we are to reinvent utopian imaginations that better incorporate nature’s capacities, uncertainty, resilience, and delight.

Taking into account visions of land health, like those of Leopold and McKibben, for example, environmentalism itself is permeated with at least some elements of utopian thinking. Even so, some observers argue that the ideals of environmentalism tend to be unrealistic with regard to the ways real humans and their societies work (Pepper 2005). At the same time, others, including McKibben, warn that so far, modern traditional utopian ideals have tended to take into account human happiness without regard for how it is connected with the rest of nature, contributing to present environmental problems. It is just these kinds of tensions, those between desire and reality, which can themselves become creative sources. Out of such disequilibria, the best of utopian dreaming unleashes fresh, unfolding dramas. I suggest that utopianism of the sort that re-imagines a good world while taking into account the inseparability of durable human happiness and land health is a potentially culturally transformative task. It is one that urgently requires the focused intelligence and open morality of all the environmental disciplines and beyond—bridging our various cultural divides.

Though members of environmental disciplines have their own proximate interests and critical methodologies, all of us belong to a shared community. Members of this community aim to draw attention to aspects of the world of life in ways that people have not been able to perceive and thus care for them before. The understandings each group discovers, in other words, start from different perspectives—of events across particular times and places, of relationships evoking meaning and emotion, and of scientifically discernable phenomena. Embedded in all of these vitally diverse approaches, however, is a generally shared ethical dimension envisioning a just world in which people would value Earth’s life, be concerned about harming it, and act beneficially according to their best lights.

Moreover, ancient and modern wisdom does *not* teach us to hide lights under baskets nor assuredly in academic silos. In an interconnected world, moral, intellectual, and practical matters tend to merge. To keep Earth healthy is not only right, as Leopold and McKibben would argue, but also prudential. To discover knowledge about the Earth is vital to understanding both how to act ethically and how to meet our needs sustainably. Multidisciplinary and cross-cultural works thus are not merely fashionable trends. They are essential to “doing our best” because the real world is intricately interconnected. Vital questions—such as, how should we think about economic growth?—are not amenable to artificial divisions of knowledge, though specialties remain important. Indeed, each specialty may be viewed as a window opening onto the world we share. It is not the window here, but the world that is of primary concern. It is critical to understand what the approaches of each field are best for (Freyfogle and Warren 2002) and to employ them

rigorously. But we need at the same time to make connections intellectually—to craft breadth of knowledge—not forgetting the great context of our narrower work. Nor can we afford reluctance to purposefully transgress boundaries of knowledge institutionally or across the professional-public divide. We must to the best of our abilities comprehend the parts and whole of Earth in relation to each other if we are to work effectively toward a wholly better world.

When we do not, we fail to see what is really happening. We fail when we work, albeit well-meaningly, merely discipline-by-discipline. Indeed, too often the environmental community also can be found ineffectively divided by institution, nation, and special interest competing with each other for funding and attention. This is one way we end up perceiving and portraying the world merely in fragments, harmfully, because this is not the way it really is. Ringed in by the illuminated circles of our own concentrations, as vital as they may be, we have discovered the hard way, for example, that shooting wolves does not protect deer (Leopold 1949); prairies may be more diverse and productive when they are moderately grazed by livestock than not at all (White 2005); Americans' oil-guzzling-car-driven life-way has made it impossible for Ugandan peasant farmers to grow food as they have in the past (Constance Okollet, personal communication, 2010); and learning that these things are so is not enough to help people think and act differently (e.g., Kahan 2010). Realizing that there is no long-run possibility of thriving humanity apart from thriving wolves, deer, forests, prairies, Ugandan villages, and the freedom to care requires understanding complex interrelationships nested in multiple scales of time and space (Leopold 1946a). It requires nesting the stories of our smaller discoveries in relation to that complex.

Complex relationships are most adeptly exposed in stories as humanities scholars and many scientists realize (e.g., van den Broek 2010; Griffiths 2007; Wilson 2002). Many indigenous people have known for generations that physical survival and spiritual vitality depend on the stories people tell (McLerran 2011). “Every culture organizes itself with its central stories,” wrote evolutionary cosmologist Brian Swimme and religion and ecology scholar Mary Evelyn Tucker. Each group's central stories, they explain—whether in words, images, dance, or music—contains what is most dear to its members. Such stories help orient us “toward the most enduring human challenges” (Tucker and Swimme 2011, 2-3). Meeting those challenges—including how to feed our families, find meaning, and promote justice—is now taking place in conditions unprecedented in humanity's history. In this time of the “Anthropocene” on this planet “Eearth,” it is difficult to know where to turn. We have change but toward what? A diverse humanity find ourselves collectively in a global transition wherein many are struggling to understand how to

fit together old and new knowledge about the world in unique places in order to thrive or at least survive. We recognize that what so many of us are doing in local places has consequences far away and for the planet as a whole, which return to affect local places. Figuring out how to meet age-old challenges in this new age of humans begs solidarity. It also demands creativity in crafting knowledge into life-orienting, visionary stories.

Such utopian stories must emerge from and return to the big, real environmental story—as stories within a story (Warren 2010; Tucker and Swimme 2011). Drawing on multiple fields of current knowledge, the unfolding tale is inseparable from that of the emergence of biodiversity, which is inseparable from that of the planet and the universe (Tucker and Swimme 2011). It involves the continuity of processes reaching back across epochs. We understand that over life's four-billion-year history on Earth, its journey has been toward greater diversity, complexity, and abundance, which builds up Earth's fertility, which breathes gases in and out of the planet's atmosphere, which makes more life possible. Life supports life. This “slowly augmented revolving fund of life,” as Leopold put it, is Earth's “capacity for self-renewal,” its “health” (Leopold 1949). Humans are now running that capacity into the ground. Soil fertility is diminishing faster than it is built up (Montgomery 2010). Climate forcing from the release of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases formerly regulated by now-disturbed fossil deposits, soils, waters, and above-ground life is heating up Earth with consequences rippling across tens of thousands of years (Pachauri et al. 2007; Pethica et al. 2010; Stager 2011). Briefly interrupting the long-term trend of increasing biodiversity, in geological timeframes, we know of five major extinction events<sup>1</sup> in life's history. It looks increasingly certain that we are in a sixth (Eldridge 1998; Barnosky et al. 2011). Subsequent to each of the first five mass extinction events, the survivors continued evolving into new forms, with those re-building diversity and re-assembling complexity over millions of years, *Homo sapiens* being among them. If a sixth mass extinction event is now underway, for the first time in Earth's history, it involves observable causes and effects rooted in the responsibility of that single species—that is, it is rooted in human responsibility (e.g., McKibben 2006; Crutzen 2002; Steffan et al. 2007). For the first time, too, as far as we know, with the emergence of *H. sapiens*, Earth has a life

<sup>1</sup> A mass extinction event is defined, based on fossil records, as “having extinction rates spiking higher than in any other geological interval of the last ~540 Ma and exhibiting a loss of over 75% of estimated species.” The last known or fifth event was “The Cretaceous event” ending about 65 Ma ago when 40% of genera were lost, an estimated 76% of species. Barnosky et al. 2011. *H. sapiens* did not emerge as such until about 200,000 years ago.

form with the capacity, not only to conceptualize time but also to tease phenomena out of an intricately interwoven nature and to mourn and celebrate the deaths and lives of their own and other life form—and therefore, to tell compelling stories that help orient themselves meaningfully within this world full of uncertainty and wonder (Tucker and Swimme 2011). We can imagine choices, select the best ones, and learn from our mistakes.

Not all stories are created equal. As author Barry Lopez (1986) points out: the dreams people have for the world help create, “a mental geography” that “becomes the geography to which society adjusts, and these can be more influential than the real geography.” Depending on the harmony between how we imagine the real and the desired, then, the dream-landscapes that guide our actions may be more or less harmful or beneficial to Earth’s life, including our own. They may be more or less “sustainable” (Warren and Freyfogle 2005). They may be more or less fantasy. Untenable utopian constructs are shaped by fraudulent faith—e.g., in human know-how to control nature—or molded by craven desires—e.g., to burn mountain after wild mountain of coal—or both. Beneficial utopian constructs, on the other hand, create spaces for life.

I propose that beneficial utopian dreaming involves three constructive elements, potentially framing solidarity in envisioning a better human-inhabited world. Within this general frame, we may also find common ground for multidisciplinary research about humans and nature. Moreover, within these general features of a mutually life-supporting mental geography, multitudes of diverse, localized, creative stories—as stories within a greater story—may play out in the tensions between reality and desire: (1) imagine people putting trust in the time-proven, creative, and self-renewing capacities of the universe and its Earth and purposely tuning their behaviors with them. Nature’s immensities are too vast, intricate, and dynamic for human minds to comprehend entirely. But beneficial mental geographies are limned with as much as we do know as we continually strive to know better. That is to say, our dream-stories play out within our most authentic conceptions of real nature’s unfolding, self-renewing story—including deep evolutionary and ecological trends that build up biodiversity and earth’s fertility, store carbon, and maintain—as we now know—a livable atmosphere as a whole. (2) Imagine the realities of human ignorance. Better worlds are not “perfect” nor will they be inhabited by “perfect” humans. We must conceive of ourselves, therefore, allowing time and space to change courses ideally before irreparable harm happens. We must, that is, incorporate precaution into our stories by allowing leeway for mistakes due to human ignorance and insensitivity and the unforeseeable. We must imagine ourselves thriving in uncertainty. (3) Imagine a world that

people would actually “actively like to live in,” as the late systems modeler Dana Meadows put it (1996). Imagine sustenance for all. Conceive satisfactions of souls’ deepest desires for happiness.

I would also argue that this frame not only places important limitations on human behavior but also—inspired with well-grounded hope—potentially creates spaces for the liberties of active love extended to Earth’s communities of life over merely utilitarian desires. The three constructive elements then—adaptive intimacy with Earth’s ways, resilient consideration of the unknown, and the dignities of sustenance and pleasure—may help scaffold an ethical orientation that extends this value to all life across all scales.<sup>2</sup> This is what today’s urgently needed utopian dreaming requires. It needs purposely to evoke active love for life—the strongest of possible human sentiments—guided by growing knowledge of its object. It will take that kind of intelligent power to stem the current killing tides. The fresh dream-stories we tell, that is, must not only inspire but must also effectively confront the life-killing economic one fueled by fossils. This harmful mental geography is based on lies about the objective goodness, the sustainability, and the happiness of a consumer lifestyle. It projects the same slides over and over, framing our expectations and life as we have known it—images of new cars, the latest handheld communication gadgets, and closets full of new jeans but not short-tailed albatrosses, snow leopards, rainbow orchids, and sea turtles.

To construct utopian imaginations that promote land health and human happiness, there are matters we must confront not only without but also within the environmental community. If we are to draw together across disciplines, institutions, religions, cultures, and geographies to re-envision a better world (Tucker and Grim 1994), I believe that we must address two interrelated internal crises: one of memory and one of courage. In multiple senses, the great environmental crisis now unfolding is a crisis of human memory. It is a crisis emerging from lost intimacies with the peculiarities of the real wonders of life. We often do not appreciate what we have until it is threatened or lost, it seems. Even to stimulate such forlorn hope for life, though, first requires noticing what is gone missing and restoring it to our minds’ eyes, even our bodies’ viscera. And this is a greater challenge yet in light of what seems a human tendency to erase from our consciousness what we know is endangered in advance of its death, tending to be looking already beyond it (Kundera 1986). Moreover, biodiversity itself—and Earth’s will-of-its own, its wildness—is the source of our own creativity. As Czech author Milan

<sup>2</sup> For links with a group of scholars working in this area and in bringing together ways of knowing see: <http://www.ecologicalhumanities.org/about.html>

Kundera points out, the condition of our captivation by nature and our capacities for poetry may be inseparable: “It’s some time now since the river, the nightingale, the paths through the field have disappeared from man’s mind. When nature disappears from the planet who will notice?.... Where are the great poets now? Have they vanished, or have their voices only become inaudible?” (Kundera 1986, 42). In order to imagine a better world incorporating both land health and human happiness, we must engage with nature in person—touch, see, feel, smell, study, remember, and otherwise perceive it, whatever our fields may be. Intimacy with nature may be a great unifying force. It is a prudential necessity when it comes to aligning with it.

The great environmental crisis now unfolding is also arguably a crisis of human courage. It is difficult to talk about dreams and love in academia and politics, among other arenas. “We talk about our fears, frustrations, and doubts endlessly, but we talk only rarely and with embarrassment about our dreams,” wrote Meadows (1996). She notes, too, that: “One is not allowed in the industrial world to speak about love, except in the most romantic and trivial sense of the word. Anyone who calls upon the capacity of people to practice brotherly and sisterly love, love of humanity as a whole, love of nature and of our nurturing planet is more likely to be ridiculed than taken seriously” (Meadows 2004, 281–284). It certainly is no less objective to seek knowledge out of love’s desire than out of desire for wealth. To craft fresh, visionary stories counter to the now-dominant merely economic one, we must courageously talk about our dreams and our love. Courage is different than hubris, which also seems an important thing to recognize. The one steps through fear, humbly willing to take the consequences, the other steps on it, with dangerous repercussions. What is it, then, that we in the wide environmental community really value and desire in common—justice, liberty, and fertile soils? Wild biodiversity and happiness? Beauty and bread? Drinkable water, clothing, shelter, and a life-preserving climate? In an interconnected world, can we have anything in the long run without having it all? How many of us will stand together, transgressing false boundaries, and say clearly what we want in common with as many unique manifestations as possible?

In the eye of the storm, as photographer Robert Adams (2006) asks: “For what is it reasonable still to dream?” This is an open-ended question not answerable once and for all. It has infinite corollaries, many age-old, some new—many pressing, if we want to become life-benefitting members of Earth’s communities. Fundamentally, all life depends on Earth’s self-renewing capacities—its health at all scales—to meet all of life’s desires, whatever they may be. What questions become important to ask and address taking into consideration (1) the unfolding story of real-Earth conditions, (2) the three-element framework encompassing mature hope for a better world, and (3) the need for

diverse cultures to express their desires in unique local places? How within these considerations, then, may constellations of fresh utopian stories imagine, for example, the following:

What are the values of a seed?  
 What fuels economy?  
 Must we wage wars?  
 What happens when things change?  
 Will people migrate?  
 What is wild?  
 What do we remember?  
 What guides human reproduction?  
 What does “enough” mean?  
 How do we think about possession?  
 How do we die well?  
 What pleasures may we have?  
 What is secure?  
 What is good work?  
 Who is a community?

Moreover, how might we imagine assortments of answers in connection with each other? Who else but the environmental community—all of us—is more responsible for doing our best to perform such intricate and exciting mental experiments? Who else can help to articulate coherent possibilities toward which to act? Who else is more capable of stoking up conversation about what a good world may become in a time of great transition and urgent need? Now is the time to dream.

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