

To the Editors of World Watch Magazine

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dodson_worldwatch_letter_3-01.html by Edward J. Dodson, Cherry Hill, NJ

Reading World Watch magazine every two months is often a stressful experience. Despite the awakening of concern for the survival of this planet and the body of knowledge accumulating that warns of the encircling threats, the message is clear - our socio-political arrangements and institutions are the primary obstacles to behavior changes. Politics does indeed dictate both economic outcomes and the "one step forward two steps backward" attention to remediation of the damaging footprint left to date by our species.

I remember Carl Sagan's warnings to us in the last episode of Cosmos. We have somehow avoided thus far the triggering of nuclear winter, but there are no meaningful reforms set in motion that will simultaneously improve the human condition while reducing our footprint so that other species of animals and plants flourish.

At a point in history when, for example, the nation-state ought to be recognized for the contrived engine of privilege it has always been, groups of people all around the globe have taken up arms in pursuit of political sovereignty and control over some portion of the earth to the exclusion of others. The most fundamental human right - the right of equal access to the earth and the natural opportunities provided on this planet - is denied under the laws of every nation-state in the world. As Carl Sagan said, borders are not visible from space; these are artificial, created to keep some people in and others out and to set the stage for instituting private property in nature. From the earliest periods of permanent settlements, those who gained and held power constructed ways to control access to the earth. Chieftains become kings, warriors become aristocrats, demanded a share of what peasants produced. The commons were enclosed and eventually title deeds to land - issued by the king - brought the land controlled by the group into the personal ownership of a few. With the introduction of gold and silver coinage as money, peasants were now required to bid against one another for access (continued on page 5)

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to crop land. Not much has changed in the world today.

Throughout most of recorded history, the more thoughtful - those concerned with moral principles and justice - challenged or defended the idea of private property in nature. In the Western intellectual tradition, we have John Locke to thank for opening the door by his distinction between behavior consistent with "liberty" and that which fell within the realm of "licence." One takes licence or is given licence, as by the king or government. Conquest by force has long been one of the primary means of taking licence. The winners displace the former deed holders and install themselves as the new landlords. Not much has changed in the world today.

Political economists began to write about land markets and what they called "ground rent." With the broad issuance of land deeds and the use of coinage and credit, Adam Smith and his French counterparts developed the earliest detailed laws of the production and distribution of wealth. They wrote about the circumstances that caused the rental value of land to rise or fall and by how much. They struggled with the moral dilemma of knowing that landowners were taking in "ground rent" what they had no part in producing. And, some (such as Thomas Paine and the Physiocrat Turgot) preceded Henry George by more than a century in arguing that "ground rent" belonged to the community and not to any individual.

This reform has never materialized. We are paying an enormous price because landowners continue to monopolize a large portion of the earth without having to compensate the rest of humanity for the privilege. The landless poor, worse off, are ever reduced to attempting to exploit the least fertile, most fragile parts of the globe in their day-to-day efforts to survive. With the continued increase in human population competing for some small space on which to live and scratch out a living, systems of law that continue to reward "rent seeking" behavior and protect the privileges long held by the few are certain to bring about the ecosystem collapse we are desperately trying to prevent.