

The War Against Nature

> By Michael Mountain

Our work for the animals is a work of the soul.



“If we think of nature as our adversary, we will lose.”

An op-ed piece in the *New York Times*, October 12, runs under the title "Next: A War Against Nature."

In fairness, the title doesn't do justice to the article, which describes the valuable role the military can play in response to natural disasters. (Best Friends rescue teams who worked with the troops after Hurricane Katrina can certainly testify to that.)

But that title - the very notion of waging a war against nature - suggests that our modern world has a really big problem in terms of how we relate to the natural world.

Very simply, if we even *begin* to think of nature as our adversary, we shall lose - hands down.

Nature is bigger than we are - much, much bigger. It works according to its own implacable laws that can be either terrifying or comforting, depending on how we choose to relate to them.

The story is told of the Danish King Canute, who ruled Britain a thousand years ago and was considered such a powerful monarch that his courtiers persuaded him to stand at the seashore and command the tide to turn back. Nature, needless to say, did not take much notice.

A quaint story. Yet we are perilously close to that same mentality. Sea levels are rising around our coasts as, faster every year, the ice caps melt at both north and south poles. As the oceans warm, fueling the hurricanes they spawn, storm surges send tidal waves slamming into our shores at home and abroad. Right after Katrina and Rita, Hurricane Stan roared into Central America, killing at least 2,000 people.

When disaster strikes, and we discover we cannot turn back the tides or otherwise

command the forces of nature, we talk proudly of fighting back, strengthening our defenses, and rebuilding our homes and businesses bigger and better - all in defiance of the delicate balance of nature and the very phenomena that gave life to this planet in the first place.

New Orleans, incidentally, is not the only major population center that builds levees to defend itself against threatening waters. More than 1,000 miles of deteriorating levees extend east from the San Francisco Bay - weak barriers separating potential floodwaters from the cities and farmlands of what are now the fastest growing regions of California.

And all the while, we ignore the growing number of inconvenient voices warning us that our Titanic civilization is already crashing into the iceberg. "Nonsense!" we laugh. "Impossible. Keep the good times going. We are surely a chosen people, with dominion over nature."

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Tides of destruction, whether by water, earth, air, or fire, have always been with us. The big new factor is the massive increase in human population - along with the growth of its arrogance.

In truth, much of the loss of life in the tsunami that rolled across the Indian Ocean last Christmas was caused not simply by the tidal surge itself, but by the fact that people thought they could defy the waves and build ever-expanding cities along the coastlines of South Asia. China's booming population, too, occupies major flood zones.

Continued on page 51

Continued from page 4

Here at home, the west coast is by no means our only major earthquake zone. Scientists expect a significant quake within the next 35 years along the heartland's New Madrid fault line. Cities like Memphis and St. Louis barely existed when the last major quake struck there in 1811.

And abroad, the earthquake that just struck the Kashmir region may have killed 55,000 people - again in a region that was, until recently, only sparsely populated.

We try to hold back the flames, too, encroaching ever further into virgin lands to build dream houses in regions that can burst into flames at the drop of a match or a bolt of lightning.

And now disaster threatens from the air, as bird flu wings its way around the world. The virus itself is all-natural; the pandemic that it threatens is all man-made, spreading

in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. Two things stand out about those rescue efforts: One, the serious inadequacy of the official response; the other, the amazing grassroots response of people everywhere.

Leaving aside the troops, who behaved in an exemplary fashion, it has to be said that the behavior of many other arms of government, along with other major institutions and nonprofits, left much to be desired. The reason is simple: These bodies exist primarily to serve and perpetuate themselves, and seem fundamentally incapable of learning the lessons of the arrogance of power that eventually brings them all down.

The volunteers and grassroots groups, on the other hand, are there simply to help. They exist out of altruism, they operate out of love, and their personal satisfaction derives from having saved lives and done good.

It would be short-sighted for any of us to cling to the belief that we are not heading

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unnaturally from chicken to chicken in the horrific conditions of the crowded livestock pens of Asia, and mutating into strains that can quickly kill people working there.

Science has just confirmed that the great flu pandemic of 1918, which killed 50 million people, was also a bird flu that jumped to humans, spreading easily through the unnatural, crowded conditions of the barracks and trenches of World War I.

Avian flu has not yet mutated into a strain that can be passed from human to human. But it has indeed mutated into a strain that can kill pigs. And since pigs and people are similar in many ways (which is why we like to test our bombs and bullets on them, and use their hearts for transplants), they may become the intermediary by which this flu mutates to an all-human strain.

The virus has also killed tigers at the Bangkok Zoo - another alarming sign, since flu is not generally a problem to cats. And now it has crossed from Asia into Europe, infecting birds in Turkey and Romania.

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Much of this edition of *Best Friends* magazine is devoted to animal rescue work

into difficult times. The 21st century, just five years old, is already showing its dark face. All around the world, we humans are at war with ourselves and each other. And many people take the attitude that we can even go to war with nature, too, or just ignore its warning signs - which is simply a passive attempt to fight it off.

Governments and institutions will not save us from what is to come. Wherever you look, their behavior points to the fact that they are, at best, followers, not leaders.

As is so often the case historically in times of upheaval, the lead will come from the grassroots.

Those leaders are already emerging. They are not people with loud voices and empty promises. Nor are they trying to fight nature - or indeed anything or anyone else.

Rather, they are the caring people whose hands and hearts are quietly going about the work of saving lives and doing good wherever they can.

They are to be found in every country and every culture. And, in a world where the times are proverbially "out of joint," they are already starting to come together as the seeds of a new beginning. ✨