

The Fire Last Time

Sooner or later we sit down to a banquet of consequences
Robert Louis Stevenson

Almost two years ago I had the dubious honor of writing about the massive fires, which swept through my native Southern California, killing dozens and displacing thousands. Two of my children were among the affected, when their neighborhood was evacuated. The intensity and scope of the damage provided a backdrop for some philosophizing on man's relationship with Nature:

,,, parts of San Diego County now look like ground zero at Hiroshima. The long-term results of environmental malfeasance at the planetary level invite a day of reckoning that will make the recent fires in California look like child's play. Mankind may one day find itself longing for the lazy life up in the trees. The real original sin is not eating the wrong apple. It's the hubris, the egocentric pride, of trying to re-engineer the tree of life.
(Reflections in the Flames, The Howler Jan. 2004)

"More doom and gloom," pronounced a friend who is currently trying to figure out how to fit 20 condos on a one-hectare lot. Maybe so, but these days it is another area of the US in the news...and this time the agent of nature's elemental fury was water not fire.

Ten days of non-stop reports on CNN, photos, and the ever-rising body count all fall short of encompassing the magnitude of the effect that hurricane Katrina will have on the history of the region and the US. "Ninety thousand square miles of debris," wrote one journalist, roughly 50 times the area of Costa Rica. We have been reminded again—in a big way--that Nature holds all the wild cards.

An area of the country well known for its evangelical Christian tradition is now lamenting the disappearance of its coastal vegetation and the offshore barrier islands

which would have mitigated the storm's impact upon landfall. Perhaps there will be a newfound realization that the biblical injunction to subdue nature to man's designs, comes with an even greater need to proceed with caution in the massive reordering of complex natural systems like the powerful Mississippi.

"Faith moves mountains," but the governor of Louisiana's call to "...pray down the hurricane to a force 2," apparently caught the Almighty tending to other cosmic chores. One is tempted to guess how many god-fearing southerners are currently wondering if God went back on his promise to Noah, or worse yet, he doesn't take a literal interpretation of the good book.

It appears that the Ark was a better gambit for Noah than prayer was for the gulf coast. All the same, if sanitary conditions at the Super Dome are any indication, the hold in the Ark was one funky place to ride out a 40-day storm along with all of the other air-breathing animals of the planet, even with 30,000 square cubits of space below deck.

Desirous of more breathing room of their own, Americans who can afford it continue flocking to Costa Rica looking for a piece of Pura Vida. Eager to accommodate the next wave of buyers, developers are busy at work.

My condo building friend passed by today on his way to install a water line to a new project in an undeveloped coastal area. By his own admission there "might" be problems with the water supply. Still he and others are forging ahead with projects, confident that minor details like adequate water can be resolved at least until they have departed the scene with sufficient return on investment.

This is the dominant land use ethic that reigns in Guanacaste. From Playa Hermosa to Samara, the coastal

rivers and streams are running red from the mad rush to offer slices of paradise to a growing stream of refugees from the north. The rainy season makes it easy to forget the water trucks and rationing during summer in Tamarindo, the fecal coliform in the wells. With the blue flag fluttering at places like Junquillal, it is hard to imagine the subsoil saturation of sewage that sooner or later will make it into the estuaries and the ocean just as it has in the aquifers above San Jose.

The lessons of New Orleans are so far away and still less than entirely clear. The mud slinging and blame is variously attributed to the incompetence of the feds, the poor and elderly for staying put, American motorists for causing global warming and even the Arabs for sucking us into a war that diverted funds from domestic priorities.

Some observers paint recent events as the 'law of return' for the land of Manifest Destiny. After conquering the West, saving Europe from the Huns, landing on the moon, building 50,000 miles of superhighways and developing a far flung empire of military and economic reach, the country that appeared capable of anything is having a difficult time dealing with a double dose of manifest consequences.

The brutal reality is that what a recent Newsweek calls the 'coming energy crunch' will make it more costly and more difficult to dig out after the more frequent --and much stronger--natural disasters associated with global warming. According to this view, the Gulf Coast provides a glimpse of the future.

A sense that all is not well in the security of their homeland is voiced by many Americans who are looking to settle in Costa Rica, seduced by the slogan of Pura Vida, the lure of open space and the warm breezes off the sea. They are often unaware of the environmental damage caused by the ongoing wave of development that

is impacting Guanacaste from the beachfront to the hilltops. Adding environmental concerns—water, sewage and others—to the economic calculus of a developer's bottom line will not only make for more satisfied clients. It will leave more Pura Vida around to be savored by the next generation of Gringo-castecos.

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