

## Thrillin' at the MacMillan #2: SUSTAINING THE PLANET

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### SUSTAINING THE THRILL [by] Spider Robinson

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Sustaining the planet means widely different things to all of us—so let's try and define our aim.

The phrase surely isn't meant literally. Terra was sustaining herself just fine for millions of years before the first oxygen-producing lifeforms infested her and wrecked her nice methane ecosystem, dooming entire phyla to extinction. Mother Gaia's not alarmed by "global warming": she's survived vastly greater environmental changes more than once, and will again. Certainly, she can be harmed, even destroyed—by collision with a wandering planet of equal mass, for instance, or by Papa Sol's eventual, inevitable slow expansion into a red giant star, or even by his suddenly going nova...though that last is admittedly unlikely to occur outside the pages of an exceptionally daring science fiction novel. But even the boldest SF writers hesitate to suggest anything we might *do* about events that large, even given forewarning, so discussion is bootless.

Nor can we be talking about sustaining the biosphere, the Circle of Life. As noted, it has endured changes of vastly greater magnitude than anything we could do to it if we tried, several times now. Life appears to have begun on this planet about fifteen minutes after it finished cooling—or perhaps it was much sooner, and trillions of lifeforms adapted to life in an environment of boiling rock went tragically extinct to make way for amoebas—and there will be abundant, effusive life here *long* after the bald monkeys with odd paws have gone.

I think what most of us mean when we speak of sustaining the planet is sustaining the human race. It's just that we've been told—over and over—that planets and ecosystems and biospheres are good, noble things, and human beings are ridiculous, shameful things. Somehow we've missed the fact that every human *is* a planet, and an ecosystem, and a biosphere—and the far more obvious fact that human beings are the *only* fragments of this entire planetary life-matrix that ever even momentarily give a damn about "preserving" any part of it. Every other lifeform just takes what comes, without examining its own excrement for signs of sin.

What we really want to know, of course, is: can we sustain our *numbers*, *on* this planet. And what we secretly really *really* want to know is, how long can we sustain and spread our present *lifestyle*, without ecoconsequences so catastrophic they'd actually impinge on *us personally*? Or is God...excuse me, nature...going to justly punish us for our wicked desire to heat our homes, get to work, watch a little TV, and every so often make a baby?

I know the answer, but you're not going to like it. You already sense it, and already hate it. The correct answer is, *nobody knows*.

Really. Nobody understands planetary ecology; anybody who claims to is a charlatan. No computer model can satisfactorily predict tomorrow's weather in Vancouver: multiply that by all the cities of the world, assuming perfect data for at least a century (which has never happened and never will) and you haven't *begun* to glimpse how complex a problem-sheaf global weather is. Even hindsight may never offer enough perspective.

What we're doing—all of us, from the smartest professor to the loudest Luddite—is guessing, and then looking around for factoids and evidentialisms that appear to support our intuition. You may choose to see the future as Threatening or Thrilling—and if you enjoy being paranoid, there are an almost infinite number of experts willing to assist you with dark signs and grave portents, out there. Don't worry: they'll find you.

If you prefer being optimistic, you're pretty much on your own...but I'll get you started, at least. Here are the awarenesses that soothe me when I wake in the small hours frightened for my grandchildren:

- every single negative prediction made about the prospects of the human race since I was born nearly sixty years ago has turned out to be not only false but wildly wrong. No population bomb, no global starvation by 1975, no global tyranny by 1984, no global nuclear war by 1990, no end of global oil reserves in 1990, no Y2K—the *backwards* of all those things came to pass, and a society that entered the 20th century dying in their 30s and 40s left it being able to continue complaining well into their 80s and 90s—by cellphone to offspring on the other side of the planet. Pessimism simply cannot be supported by the facts of history.

- so far, every single society that ever got rich has immediately and voluntarily—and quite unconsciously—lowered its birthrate to Zero Population Growth levels, and started cleaning up its environment, and inventing civil rights. Check it out. The wealthy do not overpopulate, the poor do. So all we need to do is make everybody everywhere wealthy.

- fortunately, this presents no serious difficulty. The power and materials to do it are handy. Enough power to run a technological civilization of six or eight billion without pollution lies right over our heads, a few hundred miles straight up, effectively free once we're bright enough to put dirt-cheap solar collectors up there and start sopping it up. Enough all-but-free iron and copper and other ores and minerals to *build* such a civilization without digging a single hole in Mother Gaia's pretty skin can be found in the same place: High Earth Orbit. All we need is a good ladder.

I'll explain that last one, since I so often draw blank looks with it even among postgrads. In airless space, nothing ever slows down, much less stops. Gun your spaceship up to 10,000 kph, turn off the drive...and centuries from now it will still be doing the same speed. So, once you reach orbit you are halfway to *anywhere*. The same amount of fuel that will get you to the Moon will also get you to Mars, or Pluto, or the next star—it'll just take longer.

So send a smart robot to the asteroid belt—which is nothing but a big planet crumbled into convenient bits. Program the robot to look for ones full of useful metals, land on them, build little rockets, and then move on. It may take a while to get it out there, and quite a while longer for the first domesticated asteroid to arrive safely back here in Earth orbit and cozy up to the smeltery for disassembly and processing...but from then on,

they'll be showing up at regular intervals. No more strip-mines—no more digging, period! No more coal mines, no more oil or gas drilling...we could make Earth the park she deserves to be.

These are thrilling thoughts for the threatened. But notice I said three paragraphs above, "...presents no *serious* difficulty." Unfortunately, there is a *silly* difficulty. The silly difficulty is, capitalism has made it so absurdly easy to get rich that a majority of the planet's rich people are currently dumb enough to think they can sustain their own personal wealth (the only wealth they care about) without getting us solidly established in space as fast as possible. They mistakenly believe sustaining their wealth means sustaining the status quo forever—which even a sensible idiot knows cannot be done.

They're encouraging you to use up the precious fuel we need to get to space, with stupidly designed homes and cars and planes they already know how to make and sell.

So the battle lines get drawn between selfish power-hungry idiots who want to stay the *only* rich people, and altruistic power-phobic idiots who want to shut down technological civilization so *nobody* is rich. (Well...to be fair, they say they just want to dial it way back, to absolute minimum power. But that's exactly what they were doing at Chernobyl, just before the roof came off. Engines run best at high revs.)

Me, I want everybody, the whole human race, to be at least as well-off as the average Canadian is right now. (Not the average American: I want 'em to have health care.)

That's the only way I can live with myself. So it's my obligation to help make that happen, by demanding it. What it will require is not less technology but more—smarter, safer, less polluting, less expensive, more humane technology. Happily, we're already starting to see it on the horizon.

Good thing. My only alternative is to go back to the woods like I did in the '70s, and live the Natural Life...until I run out of axe-heads, woodstoves, kerosene, nails, and other crucial things I can't make myself, and die nobly ever after, of cold and hunger. Been there, done that, was unable to weave the t-shirt.

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*BC writer Spider Robinson's 33rd book VARIABLE STAR, a collaboration with Robert A. Heinlein, is available from Tor Books; for further information visit*

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