

Toktok Talkie

by Joh Henschel



The World without Us

Imagine the thought experiment, said Alan Weisman in his book with the above title, that all people were suddenly to disappear from earth. Let's compare the world we know to the possible one without people. What would nature do without us? What legacy would we leave on earth? What would the rest of the world miss if we were no longer part of it?

As every Namib toktokkie knows, people are very much part of the world. Extinction of *Homo sapiens* would have many implications for the rest of the world, perhaps more than any other extinction. Bacteria, fungus, plants and animals would quickly occupy our homes, cities, in fact, everything, claiming water, land and air for themselves, unchallenged, except by each other. Dams would silt up and rivers again carry nutrients unhindered to the ocean. Nature would celebrate in a flourish and establish a new order for better or worse.

But wait, not so fast! What about all those green-house gases we have been pumping into the atmosphere these last 300 years? It would still take millennia for them to dissipate, and during that time, global warming would run its course. Our lasting legacies also include toxic chemicals from industry and garbage land-fills, nuclear fuel and waste in degrading storage and corroding warheads. Plastics continue their destructive work, suffocating, entangling, trapping over and over again. Even "biodegradable" plastics only degrade to small particles and the polymers last, still continuing to clog up marine filter-feeders and upset the foundation of food-webs. Our plastics may last for ever, at least until geological melt-down finally takes care of them. Unmanaged, the petro-chemical industry would burn in a long, grand inferno, pouring all kinds of nasty chemicals into the atmosphere, thus damping Nature's above-mentioned celebration of our absence. Weisman's list of post-human disasters continues...

The prospects of so many things that we have initiated going hay-wire without us before eventually petering out or being buried makes it fortunate that we are still around to manage and clean up the mess we are causing in the world. Not all our legacies are messy; some grand features, clever gadgets, traveling spacecraft or radio messages could become the marvel of some future sapient being that could emerge out of the shadows in our wake.

Weisman finally guides us out of the thought experiment back to the world with us. In doing so, he highlights our precarious condition, with seven billion people driving this planet's latest wave of mass-extinction, which could lead to our real extinction. The world would recover; after all, it managed to do so after the previous mass-extinctions on earth. But, what about us? No, we, too, want to remain. Extinction is not fun.

Zophosis moralesi is optimistic that a species as resourceful and arguably intelligent as we, *Homo sapiens*, will somehow continuously find ways of balancing our needs with those of the Earth so that we can join Nature's celebration of Life in a World with Us.

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