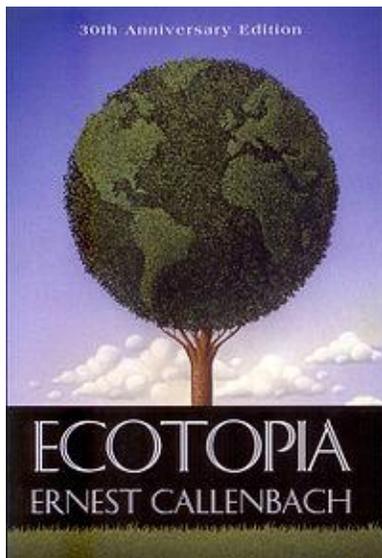


Epistle to the Ecotopians: Last Words to an America in Decline

by **Ernest Callenbach**

[This document was found on the computer of *Ecotopia* author Ernest Callenbach (1929-2012) after his death.]

*To all brothers and sisters who hold the dream in their hearts of a future world in which humans and all other beings live in harmony and mutual support -- a world of sustainability, stability, and confidence. A world something like the one I described, so long ago, in *Ecotopia* and *Ecotopia Emerging*.*



As I survey my life, which is coming near its end, I want to set down a few thoughts that might be useful to those coming after. It will soon be time for me to give back to Gaia the nutrients that I have used during a long, busy, and happy life. I am not bitter or resentful at the approaching end; I have been one of the extraordinarily lucky ones. So it behooves me here to gather together some thoughts and attitudes

that may prove useful in the dark times we are facing: a century or more of exceedingly difficult times.

How will those who survive manage it? What can we teach our friends, our children, our communities? Although we may not be capable of changing history, how can we equip ourselves to survive it?

I contemplate these questions in the full consciousness of my own mortality. Being offered an actual number of likely months to live, even though the estimate is uncertain, mightily focuses the mind. On personal things, of course, on loved ones and even loved things, but also on the Big Picture.

But let us begin with last things first, for a change. The analysis will come later, for those who wish it.

Hope. Children exude hope, even under the most terrible conditions, and that must inspire us as our conditions get worse. Hopeful patients recover better. Hopeful test candidates score better. Hopeful builders construct better buildings. Hopeful parents produce secure and resilient children. In groups, an atmosphere of hope is essential to shared successful effort: "Yes, we can!" is not an empty slogan, but a mantra for people who intend to do something together -- whether it is rescuing victims of hurricanes, rebuilding flood-damaged buildings on higher ground, helping wounded people through first aid, or inventing new social structures (perhaps one in which only people are "persons," not corporations). We cannot know what threats we will face. But ingenuity against adversity is one of our species' built-in resources. We cope, and faith in our coping capacity is perhaps our biggest resource of all.

Mutual support. The people who do best at basic survival tasks (we know this experimentally, as well as intuitively) are cooperative, good at teamwork, often altruistic, mindful of the common good. In drastic emergencies like hurricanes or earthquakes, people surprise us by their sacrifices -- of food, of shelter, even sometimes of life itself. Those who survive social or economic collapse, or wars, or pandemics, or starvation, will be those who manage scarce resources fairly; hoarders and dominators win only in the short run, and end up dead, exiled, or friendless. So, in every way we can we need to help each other, and our children, learn to be cooperative rather than competitive; to be helpful rather than hurtful; to look out for the communities of which we are a part, and on which we ultimately depend.

Practical skills. With the movement into cities of the U.S. population, and much of the rest of the world's people, we have had a massive de-skilling in how to do practical tasks. When I was a boy in the country, all of us knew how to build a tree house, or construct a small hut, or raise chickens, or grow beans, or screw pipes together to deliver water. It was a sexist world, of course, so when some of my chums in eighth grade said we wanted to learn girls' "home ec" skills like making bread or boiling eggs, the teachers were shocked, but we got to do it. There was widespread competence in fixing things -- impossible with most modern contrivances, of course, but still reasonable for the basic tools of survival: pots and pans, bicycles, quilts, tents, storage boxes.

We all need to learn, or relearn, how we would keep the rudiments of life going if there were no paid specialists around, or means to pay them. Every child should learn elementary carpentry, from layout and sawing to driving nails. Everybody should know how to chop wood

safely, and build a fire. Everybody should know what to do if dangers appear from fire, flood, electric wires down, and the like. Taking care of each other is one practical step at a time, most of them requiring help from at least one other person; survival is a team sport.

Organize. Much of the American ideology, our shared and usually unspoken assumptions, is hyper-individualistic. We like to imagine that heroes are solitary, have super powers, and glory in violence, and that if our work lives and business lives seem tamer, underneath they are still struggles red in blood and claw. We have sought solitude on the prairies, as cowboys on the range, in our dependence on media (rather than real people), and even in our cars, armored cabins of solitude. We have an uneasy and doubting attitude about government, as if we all reserve the right to be outlaws. But of course human society, like ecological webs, is a complex dance of mutual support and restraint, and if we are lucky it operates by laws openly arrived at and approved by the populace.

If the teetering structure of corporate domination, with its monetary control of Congress and our other institutions, should collapse of its own greed, and the government be unable to rescue it, we will have to reorganize a government that suits the people. We will have to know how to organize groups, how to compromise with other groups, how to argue in public for our positions. It turns out that "brainstorming," a totally noncritical process in which people just throw out ideas wildly, doesn't produce workable ideas. In particular, it doesn't work as well as groups in which ideas are proposed, critiqued, improved, debated. But like any group process, this must be protected from domination by powerful people and also over-talkative people. When the group

recognizes its group power, it can limit these distortions. Thinking together is enormously creative; it has huge survival value.

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Learn to live with contradictions. These are dark times, these are bright times. We are implacably making the planet less habitable. Every time a new oil field is discovered, the press cheers: "Hooray, there is more fuel for the self-destroying machines!" We are turning more land into deserts and parking lots. We are wiping out innumerable species that are not only wondrous and beautiful, but might be useful to us. We are multiplying to the point where our needs and our wastes outweigh the capacities of the biosphere to produce and absorb them. And yet, despite the bloody headlines and the rocketing military budgets, we are also, unbelievably, killing fewer of each other proportionately than in earlier centuries. We have mobilized enormous global intelligence and mutual curiosity, through the Internet and outside it. We have even evolved, spottily, a global understanding that democracy is better than tyranny, that love and tolerance are better than hate, that hope is better than rage and despair, that we are prone, especially in catastrophes, to be astonishingly helpful and cooperative.

We may even have begun to share an understanding that while the

dark times may continue for generations, in time new growth and regeneration will begin. In the biological process called "succession," a desolate, disturbed area is gradually, by a predictable sequence of returning plants, restored to ecological continuity and durability. When old institutions and habits break down or consume themselves, new experimental shoots begin to appear, and people explore and test and share new and better ways to survive together.

It is never easy or simple. But already we see, under the crumbling surface of the conventional world, promising developments: new ways of organizing economic activity (cooperatives, worker-owned companies, nonprofits, trusts), new ways of using low-impact technology to capture solar energy, to sequester carbon dioxide, new ways of building compact, congenial cities that are low (or even self-sufficient) in energy use, low in waste production, high in recycling of almost everything. A vision of sustainability that sometimes shockingly resembles *Ecotopia* is tremulously coming into existence at the hands of people who never heard of the book.

Now in principle, the Big Picture seems simple enough, though devilishly complex in the details. We live in the declining years of what is still the biggest economy in the world, where a looter elite has fastened itself upon the decaying carcass of the empire. It is intent on speedily and relentlessly extracting the maximum wealth from that carcass, impoverishing our former working middle class. But this maggot class does not invest its profits here. By law and by stock-market pressures, corporations must seek their highest possible profits, no matter the social or national consequences -- which means moving

capital and resources abroad, wherever profit potential is larger. As Karl Marx darkly remarked, "Capital has no country," and in the conditions of globalization his meaning has come clear.

The looter elite systematically exports jobs, skills, knowledge, technology, retaining at home chiefly financial manipulation expertise: highly profitable, but not of actual productive value. Through "productivity gains" and speedups, it extracts maximum profit from domestic employees; then, firing the surplus, it claims surprise that the great mass of people lack purchasing power to buy up what the economy can still produce (or import).

Here again Marx had a telling phrase: "Crisis of under-consumption." When you maximize unemployment and depress wages, people have to cut back. When they cut back, businesses they formerly supported have to shrink or fail, adding their own employees to the ranks of the jobless, and depressing wages still further. End result: something like Mexico, where a small, filthy rich plutocracy rules over an impoverished mass of desperate, uneducated, and hopeless people.

Barring unprecedented revolutionary pressures, this is the actual future we face in the United States, too. As we know from history, such societies can stand a long time, supported by police and military control, manipulation of media, surveillance and dirty tricks of all kinds. It seems likely that a few parts of the world (Germany, with its worker-council variant of capitalism, New Zealand with its relative equality, Japan with its social solidarity, and some others) will remain fairly democratic.

The U.S., which has a long history of violent plutocratic rule unknown to

the textbook-fed, will stand out as the best-armed Third World country, its population ill-fed, ill-housed, ill-educated, ill-cared for in health, and increasingly poverty-stricken: even Social Security may be whittled down, impoverishing tens of millions of the elderly.

As empires decline, their leaders become increasingly incompetent -- petulant, ignorant, gifted only with PR skills of posturing and spinning, and prone to the appointment of loyal idiots to important government positions. Comedy thrives; indeed writers are hardly needed to invent outrageous events.

We live, then, in a dark time here on our tiny precious planet. Ecological devastation, political and economic collapse, irreconcilable ideological and religious conflict, poverty, famine: the end of the overshoot of cheap-oil-based consumer capitalist expansionism.

If you don't know where you've been, you have small chance of understanding where you might be headed. So let me offer a capsule history for those who, like most of us, got little help from textbook history.

At 82, my life has included a surprisingly substantial slice of American history. In the century or so up until my boyhood in Appalachian central Pennsylvania, the vast majority of Americans subsisted as farmers on the land. Most, like people elsewhere in the world, were poor, barely literate, ill-informed, short-lived. Millions had been slaves. Meanwhile in the cities, vast immigrant armies were mobilized by ruthless and often violent "robber baron" capitalists to build vast industries that made things: steel, railroads, ships, cars, skyscrapers.

Then, when I was in grade school, came World War II. America built the greatest armaments industry the world had ever seen, and when the war ended with most other industrial countries in ruins, we had a run of unprecedented productivity and prosperity. Thanks to strong unions and a sympathetic government, this prosperity was widely shared: a huge working middle class evolved -- tens of millions of people could afford (on one wage) a modest house, a car, perhaps sending a child to college. This era peaked around 1973, when wages stagnated, the Vietnam War took a terrible toll in blood and money, and the country began sliding rightward.

In the next epoch, which we are still in and which may be our last as a great nation, capitalists who grew rich and powerful by making things gave way to a new breed: financiers who grasped that you could make even more money by manipulating money. (And by persuading Congress to subsidize them -- the system should have been called Subsidism, not Capitalism.) They had no concern for the productivity of the nation or the welfare of its people; with religious fervor, they believed in maximizing profit as the absolute economic goal. They recognized that, by capturing the government through the election finance system and removing government regulation, they could turn the financial system into a giant casino.

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the intelligence, the strength, and the mutual courage to break through to another positive era."

Little by little, they hollowed the country out, until it was helplessly dependent on other nations for almost all its necessities. We had to import significant steel components from China or Japan. We came to pay for our oil imports by exporting food (i.e., our soil). Our media and our educational system withered. Our wars became chronic and endless and stupefyingly expensive. Our diets became suicidal, and our medical system faltered; life expectancies began to fall.

And so we have returned, in a sort of terrible circle, to something like my boyhood years, when President Roosevelt spoke in anger of "one third of a nation ill-housed, ill-fed, ill-clothed." A large and militant contingent of white, mostly elderly, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant right wingers, mortally threatened by their impending minority status and pretending to be liberty-lovers, desperately seek to return us still further back.

Americans like to think of ours as an exceptional country, immune through geographical isolation and some kind of special virtue to the tides of history. Through the distorted lens of our corporate media, we possess only a distorted view of what the country is really like now. In the next decades, we shall see whether we indeed possess the intelligence, the strength, and the mutual courage to break through to another positive era.

No futurist can foresee the possibilities. As empires decay, their civilian

leaderships become increasingly crazed, corrupt, and incompetent, and often the military (which is after all a parasite of the whole nation, and has no independent financial base like the looter class) takes over. Another possible scenario is that if the theocratic red center of the country prevails in Washington, the relatively progressive and prosperous coastal areas will secede in self-defense.

Ecotopia is a novel, and secession was its dominant metaphor: how would a relatively rational part of the country save itself ecologically if it was on its own? As *Ecotopia Emerging* puts it, Ecotopia aspired to be a beacon for the rest of the world. And so it may prove, in the very, very long run, because the general outlines of Ecotopia are those of any possible future sustainable society.

**"Let us embrace decay, for it is the source of all
new life and growth."**

The "ecology in one country" argument was an echo of an actual early Soviet argument, as to whether "socialism in one country" was possible. In both cases, it now seems to me, the answer must be no. We are now fatally interconnected, in climate change, ocean impoverishment, agricultural soil loss, etc., etc., etc. International consumer capitalism is a self-destroying machine, and as long as it remains the dominant social form, we are headed for catastrophe; indeed, like rafters first entering the "tongue" of a great rapid, we are already embarked on it.

When disasters strike and institutions falter, as at the end of empires, it does not mean that the buildings all fall down and everybody dies. Life goes on, and in particular, the remaining people fashion new institutions that they hope will better ensure their survival.

So I look to a long-term process of "succession," as the biological concept has it, where "disturbances" kill off an ecosystem, but little by little new plants colonize the devastated area, prepare the soil for larger and more complex plants (and the other beings who depend on them), and finally the process achieves a flourishing, resilient, complex state -- not necessarily what was there before, but durable and richly productive. In a similar way, experiments under way now, all over the world, are exploring how sustainability can in fact be achieved locally. Technically, socially, economically -- since it is quite true, as ecologists know, that everything is connected to everything else, and you can never just do one thing by itself.

Since I wrote *Ecotopia*, I have become less confident of humans' political ability to act on commonsense, shared values. Our era has become one of spectacular polarization, with folly multiplying on every hand. That is the way empires crumble: they are taken over by looter elites, who sooner or later cause collapse. But then new games become possible, and with luck *Ecotopia* might be among them.

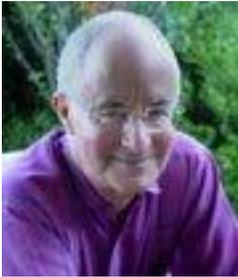
Humans tend to try to manage things: land, structures, even rivers. We spend enormous amounts of time, energy, and treasure in imposing our will on nature, on preexisting or inherited structures, dreaming of permanent solutions, monuments to our ambitions and dreams. But in periods of slack, decline, or collapse, our abilities no longer suffice for all this management. We have to let things go.

All things "go" somewhere: they evolve, with or without us, into new forms. So as the decades pass, we should try not always to futilely fight these transformations. As the Japanese know, there is much unnoticed beauty in *wabi-sabi* -- the old, the worn, the tumble-down, those things

beginning their transformation into something else. We can embrace this process of devolution: embellish it when strength avails, learn to love it.

There is beauty in weathered and unpainted wood, in orchards overgrown, even in abandoned cars being incorporated into the earth. Let us learn, like the Forest Service sometimes does, to put unwise or unneeded roads "to bed," help a little in the healing of the natural contours, the re-vegetation by native plants. Let us embrace decay, for it is the source of all new life and growth.

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Ernest Callenbach, author of the classic environmental novel [Ecotopia](#) and [Ecotopia Emerging](#), among other works, founded and edited the internationally known journal [Film Quarterly](#). He died at 83 on April 16th, 2012 -- leaving behind this final unpublished document on his computer.

