

## Life in the Age of Consequences

Although no one knows what the decades ahead will bring precisely, there are enough indicators available to say with confidence that the 21<sup>st</sup> century represents a new era. Whether the concern is climate change, peak oil, overpopulation, species extinction, food and water shortages, or something else, the challenges ahead are varied and daunting.

They are elements of what I call the *Age of Consequences* – the era in which we, and subsequent generations, begin to grapple with the cumulative effects of two hundred years of full-throttle industrialism. It's not just about the effects of greenhouse gases or toxic wastes, but our decisions also. Action has consequences, of course, but so does *inaction* – and we did plenty of both last century.

Metaphorically, I think of the Age of Consequences as a hurricane that has been building slowly over open water for some time but is now approaching shore. We can already feel its winds. Naturally, a strenuous effort is needed to lower the wind speed of this hurricane as much as possible – such as reducing the amount of greenhouse gases entering the atmosphere. However, we must also prepare basic support systems, including food, fuel, and shelter, since the hurricane is destined to make landfall no matter what we do.

In other words, we need to build ecological and economic **resilience** – which the dictionary defines as “the ability to recover from or adjust easily to misfortune or change” – among landowners, organizations, and communities so that they can weather the coming storm.

Ecologically, building resilience means *reversing the downward trend of ecosystem health*. And it needs to happen on a global scale. Fortunately, there has been early progress on this front, including the development of progressive land restoration and management methods, sustainable farming and ranching practices, production of local food, expansion of watershed-based democratic collaboratives, and the exploration of regenerative economic strategies, albeit on small scales so far.

Reversing ecosystem decline, however, requires the adoption of a new philosophy: that *all natural landscapes must now be actively managed*. Some may need more management than others depending on their current condition, but under the global effect of climate change, for example, we can no longer turn our backs on our responsibilities no matter how big or small.

Economically, building resilience means relocalization – a word that will likely dominate our lives soon. The inevitability of rising energy costs, for instance, means more and more of our daily lives, from food production to where we work and play, will be lived closer to home. This won't be by choice, as it is currently, but by necessity.

Relocalization can be a form of rediscovery – learning about our roots, about community, neighbors, gardens, and doing with less in general. One could look at relocalization entrepreneurially – those individuals and organizations that get into the game early, by

providing re-localized goods and services, stand a very good chance at a profitable living as the Age of Consequences begins to unfold.

At a minimum, relocation includes:

The Development of Local Food and Energy Sources. Working landscapes will become critical again. So will the innovations currently taking place at the nexus of agriculture and ecology – a nexus that requires working lands. Could New Mexico feed itself? If not, why not, and what can we do to stimulate local food and energy production?

Farmers and Ranchers Will Become Increasingly Important. Not only does local food and energy require local land, it requires local people with local knowledge to do the work. This means figuring out how to keep the current generation of farmers and ranchers on the land, as well as encourage the next generation to stay, come back, or give agriculture a try.

Restoration Will Become An Important Business. Producing local food and energy from working landscapes, especially in quantity, will require healthy land as well as best management practices that work ‘within nature’s model.’ However, much of our land is in poor to fair condition for a variety of reasons. The good news is that restoration work can afford local communities a bounty of jobs at good wages.

The storm moving toward shore took a long time to develop – and it’ll take an even longer time to dissipate. Our primary duty, therefore, is to be patient, to work dutifully and thoughtfully. Building resilience will take time. It will also require skill, collaboration, and respect. We’ll have to work together, and we’ll have to do things differently. The sooner we get started, the better off we will all be.

Bio:

A former archaeologist and Sierra Club activist, Courtney voluntarily dropped out of the ‘conflict industry in 1997 to co-found The Quivira Coalition, a nonprofit organization dedicated to building bridges between ranchers, conservationists, public land managers, scientists and others.

In 2006, The Quivira Coalition ventured into the ranching business when 149 heifers were delivered to its Valle Grande Ranch, located on the Santa Fe National Forest. Courtney likes to say The Quivira Coalition is now a “conservation organization that runs livestock for land health and profit.”

His writing has been published in numerous magazines. His essay “The Working Wilderness: a Call for a Land Health Movement” was recently published in Wendell Berry’s collection of essays entitled “The Way of Ignorance.” A collection of Courtney’s essays will be published by Island Press in 2008.

He lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico, with his family and a backyard full of chickens.

