



## Fear of Losing Immortality

Posted by [Glenn](#) on November 26, 2005 - 1:05pm in [The Oil Drum: Local](#)

Topic: [Sociology/Psychology](#)

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There's something I've been pondering for a long time about the reluctance of the collective conscience, particularly in the US, to accept the implications of peak oil theory. It's there, just below the surface, but drives many the various psychological defense mechanisms that people have built up.

It's the general philosophy that we as a species are above and apart from nature. It's found in many religions. It's definitely found in Star Trek. It's a pillar of both Communism and Capitalism. It's the universal idea that we are special, our superior brains separate us from the biosphere we inhabit. That we can transcend any traditional limits that nature sets for a species. That through ever greater technological innovation our species can continue to expand its size and consumption levels indefinitely into the future.

We have accepted this philosophy because the alternative is to deny our **immortality**. To accept the idea that humans could be subject to the same natural forces and limits as all other species of plant and animal on the planet - the idea that we are not special, except in our own eyes.

This is the central conflict between those who want to work toward a sustainable ecological balance and those who want to continue to delude themselves that humans can continue to extract ever greater demands on the natural environment. It's also a deeper insight into the implications of Darwin's Theory of evolution.

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Today's NY Times [editorial page](#), recounts the reaction that the poet Alfred Tennyson had to Darwin's theory in 1868, 9 years after "The Origin of Species" was published.

"What I want," he later told a friend, "is an assurance of immortality."

This was an astute remark. Many of Darwin's readers, then and now, have tried to find ways to reconcile a divine creator with the clearly secular implications of Darwin's theory of evolution. As often as not, the effort is less a search for a first cause than a plea for assurances of immortality. Tennyson recognized that Darwin's "On the Origin of Species," which was published in 1859, offered no such promises.

What bothered Tennyson wasn't merely the possible loss of eternity. It was also the central observation that underlies Darwin's theory: the fact, first noticed by Malthus, that every species on the planet, including humans, produces far more offspring in each generation than nature can support. Coming as late as we do - nearly a century and a half after Darwin's "Origin" - we have the luxury of seeing at a glance what Darwin saw: that the pressure of so much excess population is a harsh but efficient test of the value of accidental variations in any species.

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While this was a revolution in thinking at the time, the underlying implications of Darwin's

theories for mankind were never really dealt with. Which is why restating Darwin's original ideas on the limits to growth never been more relevant:

The new exhibition called "[Darwin](#)" at the American Museum of Natural History portrays the making of the man and the scientist, and it reminds us how well and how fully evolution explains the life around us. It also captures the way Darwin's theory opened an entirely new window in the human imagination.

It is possible to say, in fact, that humans did not begin to understand their place in nature until 1859. I found myself wondering, oddly, what it must have been like to be alive at such a revolutionary moment. But we live in a moment that is no less revolutionary. "Our ignorance of the laws of variation is profound," Darwin wrote. In our time - the DNA era - the mechanisms of those laws have been revealed in ways that Darwin could only dream of, and in ways that confirm the essentials of his theory beyond a shadow of a doubt.

It reminds me that while the industrial revolution changed a lot about how we interact with the natural world, our pre-industrial ancestors would in general share our view that humans are above the natural world. From the exhibit itself, we can understand more about how pre-Darwin England viewed the natural world:

Before Darwin was born, most people in England accepted certain ideas about the natural world as given. Species were not linked in a single "family tree." They were unconnected, unrelated and unchanged since the moment of their creation. And Earth itself was thought to be so young--perhaps only 6,000 years old--that there would not have been time for species to change. **In any case, people were not part of the natural world; they were above and outside it.**

The original source for this philosophy can be traced back to something that Jews, Christians and Muslims all have in their philosophical underpinnings, Genesis 1:28:

Be fruitful, and multiply, and **replenish** the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

I find this biblical passage absolutely fascinating. Being fruitful and multiplying is not a uniquely human attribute. All species on the planet are born with a genetic directive to multiply as much as possible. However, I think the key point of this ancient text is that because we as a species are mentally (and therefore technologically) superior to all other forms of life, and because we will have the same genetic drive to reproduce we have a **responsibility** to **replenish** the environment around us instead of simply extracting resources from it.

It is a time to take responsibility. A time to heal. A time for replenishment. [Turn, Turn, Turn.](#)



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