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Author: Clement, Roland C.

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Commentary

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COMMENTS ON FITZPATRICK (2002)

ROLAND C. CLEMENT[1]

1199 Whitney Avenue, Hamden, Connecticut 06517, USA

The October *Perspectives in Ornithology* by John W. Fitzpatrick (2002), calling for a recommitment to bird conservation, is timely and helpful in many respects. I was a practitioner in that vineyard for two decades, working on threatened-species programs and the chemical-pesticides problem for the National Audubon Society. Although I retired 25 years ago, I have continued to study those problems, especially from a politico-economic point of view.

It may therefore be helpful to suggest a broadening of perspectives even beyond the scientific and managerial approaches so capably outlined by Fitzpatrick. In particular, the destruction of the environment that has concerned so many of us since the turn of the twentieth century is but one aspect of a larger struggle for equity and a more substantively rational lifestyle than that of the last 400 years. We can benefit from the analyses of "the system" being provided by disciplines we biologists have not traditionally been close to.

Our dilemma is that (1) the urbanization of so much of the world's human population has robbed most people of cosmic piety that once sustained our religions and made "creation" sacred; (2) the current economic system is built on the notion that humans must conquer the world; (3) nature has no intrinsic value; (4) a desire for endless accumulation that will eventually turn all natural resources into exchangeable commodities; and (5) given the need to maintain profits to perpetuate the system, and when the demands of a growing population for a larger share of the pie diminishes profits, most entrepreneurs will reduce costs by cutting corners and foisting environmental disutilities like pollution and habitat destruction onto the general public. That is done mostly by getting the government to look the other way, or through demanding and getting outright subsidies.

The conservation movement of the twentieth century never faced the implications of that dilemma, partly because it remained naïve about the politico-economic realities that successful entrepreneurs understood all too well. Today, if we are to "recommit ourselves to the revolution," we must face those realities, and reopen discussion of nature's values and human agency. Science can help identify the parameters of wildlife survival, but the real task is that of building a society that will nurture and educate the human population to initiate such a transformation (mostly through social institutions), so that we can end by fitting our needs into the biosphere's surplus production without crowding out other forms of life—like birds.

John Terborgh (1999) has warned that the tropical forest has only ~50 years to go, except for a few mostly inadequate parks. E. O. Wilson (2002) is hopeful that large nongovernmental organizations will cajole governments, wealthy firms, and individuals to buy up sufficiently large ecotypes to tide us over. Most interestingly, I. Wallerstein (1999), a distinguished historian of world economy, forecasts the demise of the current accumulation system in ~50 years. He even sums it up for us biologists in a 10-page chapter, "Ecology and Capitalist Costs of Production." He emphasizes that this is the time to clarify what we want for the future, and to start pressing that point.

If there are some 50–70 million birdwatchers in the United States, that is a tremendous political potential we should all focus on. It is not quite true that, as Roger Tory Peterson believed, "Make a birder, and you make a conservationist," but those people at least already have contact with nature. What we have thought of as a biodiversity crisis is really a civilizational crisis. Paul Tillich saw that a generation ago when he said that the salvation of humanity and nature are one and the same task.

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[1]E-mail: rcclement@snet.net

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