

Jumping Across the Colorado

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When I was a teenager back in the early 1970s, I drove solo from Houston, Texas to San Diego, California across nearly 2,400 km of uninterrupted and enchanted desert in the American Southwest. For me, the highlight of the trip was to see the

Colorado River that far south, long after it had passed through the Grand Canyon and just before it disappeared into Mexico. But after I passed Yuma, Arizona, I was soon greeted by the “Welcome to California” sign, and I immediately realized to my amazement, and disgust, that I must have driven right over one of the world’s great rivers, in a desert no less, and not even noticed! Bewildered and too impatient to wait for the next exit to turn around, I made an illegal U-turn on the interstate highway and retraced my steps, determined to find out why I had been so blind. In fact, I had not been. There was the Colorado River all right, separating Arizona and California just as advertised, but lying humbly in no more than a glorified drainage ditch, so narrow that it seemed I could jump across without getting wet. The mighty and fabled Colorado had been reduced to this? At such a young age, I was shocked and, as I was soon to discover, terribly naïve.

Fast forward to December 26, 2004—the day of the unimaginable horror of the Sumatra earthquake and tsunami. The Earth is a dynamic place, and these things are geologically routine, but they are no less deeply painful. The world’s journalists were all over this event, of course, publishing story after story, week after week, with lots of commentary by writers who clearly don’t think about the Earth as much as we do. My wife, also an environmental scientist, started showing me statements in the nationally and internationally syndicated press like these: “Last Sunday’s tsunamis offered yet another humbling lesson that the power of Nature far exceeds the reach—indeed the imagination—of man.” And this: “...Mother Nature proves to be the worst of all terrorists in the horror of her sudden assault on innocents. We have never controlled the ways of Mother Nature...”

“Even today, with... more Earth awareness and education than ever, the public still often gets sent the wrong message.”

I have been reflecting on statements like these since, wondering why they bother me so much. What is the public supposed to take away from such grand statements? And suddenly I had answered my own question, at least to my satisfaction. These writers are just parroting what every casual observer of the planet has uttered since the dawn of humankind. Nature will have its way, and there is not much, if anything, we can do about it. After all, Nature is all powerful, right? And therein lies the rub. If we were still sitting in

caves, such contemplation would be perfectly acceptable, even beneficial to our survival. But in the modern age, despite what many in the popular press would have us believe, Nature in many ways now depends on us, not the other way around. Witness global atmospheric chemistry and temperature; witness the fact

that many population biologists say that we may be in the midst of the sixth mass extinction event since the Cambrian explosion; witness the estimation that humankind moves more Earth materials (rock and soil) on an annual basis than all geologic Earth movers (rivers, glaciers, even tectonics) combined. Oh, and what about the Colorado River? Actually, just before it enters Mexico, it has made a comeback since my teenage days. But it should be noted that it is not due to all-powerful Nature, but to us via water treaties with Mexico.

What can we learn from this? Even today, with a sophisticated press and more Earth awareness and education than ever, the public still often gets sent the wrong message. In this case, the message should have been that humankind is subject to aspects of Nature’s power that we will never control, but in other ways we are now a global force to be reckoned with, and we had better accept our role and pay attention to what is happening. Certainly, as residents of the third rock from the Sun, we have come a long way in paying attention. But in my opinion, garnered from my particular vantage point as a researcher and teacher, we still have a long, long way to go.

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NOTE FROM THE EDITORS: we are interested in hearing from you regarding Mike’s editorial and any of the other features.