

Anthropocentric Science Fiddles while the Earth Burns

By [Ted Mosquin](#)

Revised and updated from Borealis, Vol. 5, No. 1. page 55 (1992).

It is said that in the year 68 A.D., Nero, the cruel and depraved Roman emperor, set fire to Rome and then fiddled as he watched the city burn. Had the fire not been lit, the Roman empire may have lasted centuries longer, and history might have taken a different course.

Nero's perspective toward Rome reminds me of the attitude of today's governmental, corporate and cultural leaders toward the value of the Earth's natural resources and ecological processes. Thus, they have the power to save the Earth and its natural systems but instead they deliberately use and support the kinds of scientific and technical research to further exploit the Earth and its biota in ever more efficient, cruel and novel ways.

Science is a tool that can be used to provide the ecological insights needed to save the Earth and its natural values. Instead, billions of dollars are spent each year on applied research in biotechnology, chemistry, the military, industrial agriculture and the like. This human-centred research increases short-term profits and competitiveness and improves industrial output, defense capability, health, comforts and food production.

But what is the cost to our planet and the security of our future? We learn daily of the collapse of fisheries; the depletion of soils; the contamination of groundwater, freshwater and soils; the death of lakes; the destruction of Earth's ozone shield; the slow poisoning of entire landscapes by chemicals produced through research; the acceleration of deforestation; the extinction of thousands of species; global warming; the increasing misery of people in impoverished countries; the dramatic increase in ecological refugees fleeing ravaged lands. With the full knowledge of influential governments and corporations, millions of species, natural ecosystems and dozens of the planet's ecological processes that have sustained and created life on Earth for eons are being degraded, weakened or eliminated. Novel chemicals such as hormones and pesticides are being deliberately added to the human food supply. Genetically modified foods are widely used in food production without public consent. In short, while the Earth and its denizens of earthlings are in big trouble, our governments and captains of industry are financing the very kinds of research that make the environmental crisis ever worse and that are creating a dark and miserable future for humanity.

Over the years scientists around the world have been honoured by many Nobel prizes. But has the research for which they received the honour been good for the planet? Has any of this research helped create a better understanding of the roles of wild organisms, natural ecosystems and processes in maintaining the healthful ecology of the earth? None at all. And there are no Nobel prizes for ecology or conservation biology, the two sciences that hold most promise of getting humanity out of the mess that the world's political, business and cultural leaders have created. Hence, one could say that Nobel prizes for scientific research are not constructive and indeed foster the kinds of research that continue to destroy the Earth and its ecospheric stability.

In the meantime, entire ecosystems are being wiped out over huge regions even before scientists get to understand how and why they work and have worked so well in evolving the world as we humans found it. Research funding for wild species and ecosystem processes is almost nonexistent, and what is available is shrinking. The ideology that science should be financed only when it promotes yet more economic competitiveness, production and growth should be seen in the light of the terrible things that this kind of science is doing to the world.

The time has come to turn the funding of research on its head. Surely there is more than enough evidence to indicate that the extinction of species, the losses of natural ecosystems, the truncation of ecological processes and the degeneration of the Ecosphere need to be addressed through the institutions that fund scientific research. But unless priorities for funding shift dramatically toward the understanding of ecological systems and values, there will be few scientists tomorrow who have the knowledge to speak in defense of the Earth and its processes. Scientists go where the money is because science is a servant, not a master. Many scientists would gladly switch to ecosystem research and train graduate students if funding were available.

Humanity is at the point where the subject matter of science--what scientists do or do not do--is of vital importance. It's time to reconsider what ends research should serve. The guiding principles that should set the priorities for today's science are these: the intended research should provide a more sympathetic understanding of fundamental values of nature; it should shed light on and provide people with an understanding of the things that wild organisms actually do for each other, for their communities and for the health of forests, oceans, fresh waters and the stability of the planetary Ecosphere as a whole.

Right now, as the millennium draws to a close, almost all scientific research is intensely homocentric, visionless and dangerous because the planet and its natural systems are ignored. The new model for science needs to be ecological--not economic and exploitive. At stake is not only the Earth, most of its more complex and beautiful life forms and its stable and complex ecological processes, but as well, the quality of humanity's existence on this very intricate and uniquely habitable planet.

Like Nero's Rome, the Earth is burning, and modern science is being directed to deliberately set many of the fires. Can our government, corporate and cultural leaders, who are the ones in charge of the affairs of humanity, and who control the purse strings of science come to recognize the need for the kinds of research that can aid the troubled planet? Or will science continue to be anthropocentric and hence a cause of rather than a solution to the problem of the accelerating destruction of the biosphere and the Ecosphere?

[Other Ecocentric Texts](#)