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*Nature without humans.
Humans without nature.*

Human systems - societies, economies - exist within those of a larger sphere, a biosphere, or what Antje Liemann refers to as *nature*. Within the life-support systems that nature affords us, we humans can *act*, with nature we *interact*, from it - we *extract*, and, in the process, we *impact*.

It is obvious of course, that our myriad activities, indeed *ourselves* would simply not be viable without the favourable conditions that nature presents. We, and all we do, are immensely vulnerable to this sweet spot, this set of natural circumstances that make it *just right* to survive: just the right temperature, the right amount of water, the right air quality, the right degree of biodiversity...

Yet there is a real risk of such conditions changing sufficiently for this comfort zone

to be lost. A risk heightened by irreversible climate change, drought and biodiversity collapse. For some, these threats have already materialised and morphed into relocation or forced migration. And Malta could feel this too, positioned as it is to be vulnerable to sea-level change, shortage of rain and migration flows.

Important as it is, our relationship with nature extends beyond a mere (?) life-support function. As we go about living our physically viable lives, we actively extract from nature and transform its resources into inputs to our economic systems. Nature not only provides the bare minimum for us to survive, but also the means for us to thrive.

In many cases nature succeeds in replenishing itself despite our extraction. Sometimes, it barely feels our impact. The sea water we extract to cool our coastal infrastructure barely makes a difference in temperature and salinity of the Mediterranean when we pour it back it. Yet in others, we



walk a tight rope of extraction and replenishment, holding on to the virtual pole of national and supranational regulation. We try to balance the amount of fish we catch against the yield, the crops we harvest against soil quality, the birds we hunt against their capacity to breed.

And, in many instances, our extraction has been irreversibly faster, more furious than nature can compete with. Ground-water for instance has been extracted with such frenzy in Malta, that sea water has permeated the protective membrane, rendering our ground water salty – irreversibly. Ferocious extraction of Malta's yellow *globigerina* limestone undid millions of years of nature's work – forever. Biodiversity continues to be scraped away to make way for roads for more, faster, bigger vehicles, only to create a vicious circle where more roads attract more cars which need more roads which attract more cars....

Malta's territory itself, already limited, has

been irretrievably punctured with cavities to hold waste - that contaminated, devalued matter we ungratefully force back into nature when we are done defiling it. This epitomises our linear economic system: extract, produce, consume, dispose.

Yet not all of our interaction is so destructive. So much of our daily lives entail harmless interaction with nature. In many instances we create unintended short-lived side-effects due to sheer numbers of people per place: footfall in the few forested areas we have; dust needing days to dissipate. And, at its very lightest of touch, our interaction with nature has barely any consequence at all – a stroll in the countryside, a swim in the sea, the enjoyment of landscape, the observation and contemplation of nature itself, in both science and art.

Antje's own contemplation departs from the ordinary in that it is not a scientific mapping or a projection of the various impacts of humans, nor is it an analysis of some



policy scenario or other. Rather, *Antje starts from the end*. Imagine, she asks, if humans were no longer here. What would happen to nature?

The most challenging part of this question, perhaps, lies not in conjuring an image of nature without humans: we have millions of years of pre-history, and history, to assist us in that endeavour. In Malta itself, humans only set foot less than 8,000 years ago; there were only some 20,000 people on the islands until 500 years ago. Evidence of what Malta looked like before this number burgeoned 25-fold is sparse, but not entirely absent. And there are many other territories, close enough to us geographically, from deserts to forests, to allow us to visualise what nature in Malta looks like - without us.

The challenging aspect of the quest Antje presents lies in allowing ourselves to project our own end: the extinction of humankind as a whole or, at any rate, the collapse of civilization as we know it. Such a forecast is not improbable if we proceed with business as usual. Consider the precariousness of the health of the planet itself, the exponential increase in population, the threat of unleashed nuclear weaponry, synthetic biology, pandemics and other emerging crises.

Indeed, as nature changes in response to human impact, it becomes more and more plausible to imagine a scenario of nature unfit for, and therefore void of, humans.

As if to lift us out of existential despair, Antje also asks us to visualise harmony between people and nature and to contemplate what could lead to such an outcome. In so doing, she joins the legions of environmental activists, scientists, philosophers, policy-makers and increasingly, politicians, who have sought to promote such a vision of "harmony with nature", "sustainable development" or even "circular economy".

Slowly but steadily, over the last five decades, this vision, and the question of how to get there, has made its way from fringe to mainstream. There is now enough science, including social science to answer the question. But what seems to be missing is the capacity, the inspiration, the will to act collectively. It is conceivable that this could galvanise when we are face-to-face with crisis. Antje's work is ultimately an invitation to think about nature without humans, ahead of a situation where humans are left without nature.



