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GesmerUpdegrove<sup>LLP</sup>

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## EDITORIAL:

### Six Lives and Counting

Andrew Updegrove

Depending on your point of view, the daily news delivers up a glass either half empty or half full. In the short term, the negative impression can be particularly powerful, with disasters both natural and man made arising with distressing regularity. But the glass can also be viewed as half full, and that can lead to a false sense of security.

The viewpoint to which I refer would lead us to believe that most, if not all, man-made disasters in the making will fall to new technological innovations, allowing us to continue in our consumptive and polluting ways without concern for tomorrow. As with the cat with nine lives, the disasters predicted by the prognosticators of doom, from Thomas Malthus in the 18<sup>th</sup> century to Paul Ehrlich in the 20<sup>th</sup>, have always failed to materialize.

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And indeed, successes like the “green revolution” in agricultural techniques transformed the subcontinent of India, feeding a doubling population that only a few decades before had lost millions to starvation. This combination of modern pesticides, herbicides, fertilizers and irrigation magically increased production even as the prospect that increased education, prosperity and family planning would cause population growth to level off before these new limits of production were exceeded.

But the miracle didn’t sustain. Today, the same techniques that made yields multiply have now rendered many fields unusable due to the upward leaching of subsurface salt deposits, a process that has left their recently enriched owners both destitute and desperate. So also with nuclear energy, which at one time seemed to promise limitless clean energy, but today seems fraught with threats both immediate, with the risk of accidents, and long term, through our failure to come up with adequate storage solutions for radioactive generator waste. And while new technological advances have opened up previously inaccessible sources of fossil fuels, the recent deep drilling disaster in the Gulf of Mexico, as well as unresolved concerns over deep water pollution arising from oil shale “fracturing,” remind us in

this domain as well that accidents happen, and that unanticipated consequences, by definition, cannot be anticipated.

Meanwhile, the process of globalization continues apace, in all of its positive and negative aspects. The latter include increasing competition for finite resources conjoined with the inevitability that greenhouse gases and nuclear fallout do not respect national boundaries. Indeed, it seems only a matter of time – and not much of that – before hostile alliances and the threat of war rise again. This time it will not be ideologies that define power blocs, but resource dependencies and trading relationships.

Already the defensive foreign policy of resource-poor but fast growing China is being shaped by a perceived need to lock in access to fossil fuel and other resources. China has been exploring the effectiveness of playing the resource card offensively as well, as witnessed by its recent refusal to supply Japan with essential rare earth metals. Will the Cold War be replaced by a Resource War, where great powers seek to divide the world's riches among them, and compete to ally with the smaller states that possess them?

Given the lessons of history, it is hard to imagine that nations will not react as they have in the past as the stress of shortages increases. Resources figure hugely into decisions of war and peace, as well as to the ultimate outcome of those decisions. To give only the most recent examples, but for Hitler's decision to seize Rumania's oil before attacking the Soviet Union (thereby crucially delaying his advance on that nation), and Japan's decision to preemptively attack the U.S. in the face of the U.S./British/Dutch/Chinese iron, steel and oil embargo, World War II might have gone the other way.

Our ability to inhabit this planet in a way that is both healthful, fair to all, and free from war can only become exponentially more difficult as the CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere increases, as our resources dwindle and become more expensive to extract, and as the capacity of arable land to feed an ever expanding population becomes more doubtful. Yet at the same time, our failure to adequately address global warming through international negotiations showcases our inability to reach consensus on what is to be done before crisis makes action inevitable – although perhaps too late to avoid catastrophic consequences.

There is one way, however, in which we can and must move forward expeditiously, and that is to determine what the true carrying capacity of the planet may be, after factoring in a generous margin of safety to account for error, weather cyclicity, and over exploitation by those that look first to their own self interest. From that information, standards can be developed that can address every constraint that science can reliably predict, from the rate at which finite resources can be consumed, to the rate at which renewable resources can be consumed and replaced, to the ability of the earth to absorb our industrial byproducts where their output cannot be reasonably avoided.

How, when, and most regrettably, whether, humanity will arrive at agreement on how the burdens of these constraint standards will be allocated cannot be predicted. But if and when that day finally arrives, the science – and the standards

– had better be ready to be deployed. Because the only thing we can predict with assurance is that there won't be any time to waste.

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