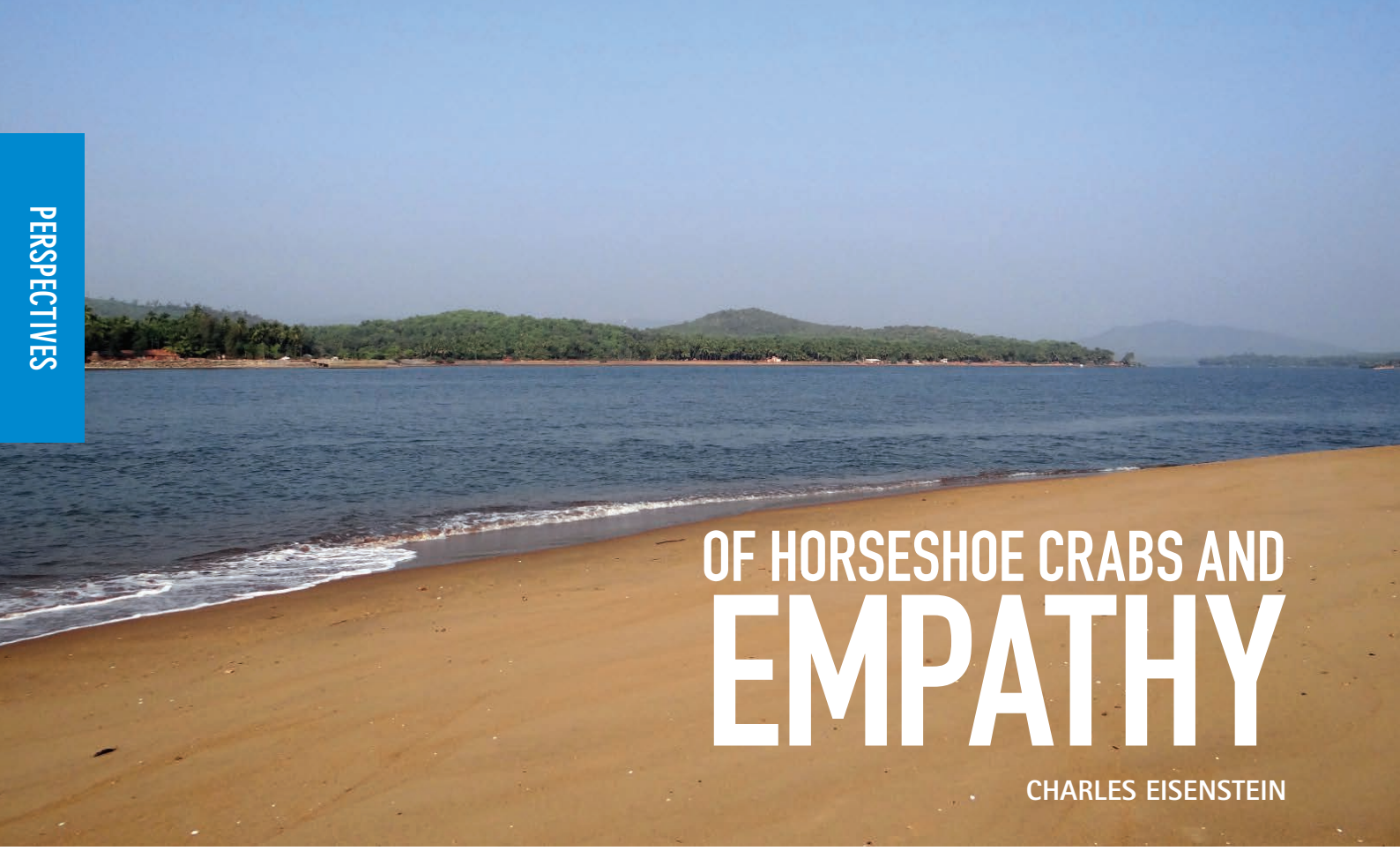

OF HORSESHOE CRABS AND EMPATHY

CHARLES EISENSTEIN

Does the current ecological crisis have one or many causes? How do our common problem-solving approaches address this challenge? What role do empathy and care for local places have in addressing it?

"That estuary used to be full of kelp and eels when we were kids," said Stella. *"It was full of all kinds of wildlife. Crabs, clams, horseshoe crabs—there was a mussel bed right over there—one time I was swimming in that pond and came face to face with an eel".*

Stella was talking about the spot where the Narrow River meets the Narraganset Bay in Rhode Island, US, one of her haunts when she was growing up. It is a pretty spot, and I would not have known it was so depleted of life unless my wife had told me.

Neither of us knows the reason why the eels disappeared. We shared a moment of sadness, and then Stella recalled another memory that somehow seemed to explain it. She and her friend Beverly would sometimes visit that part of the beach in the morning on what they called 'rescue missions'. At night, someone would come and flip over all the horseshoe crabs that had crawled onto the sand, leaving them to die there helplessly. Stella and Beverly would flip them right-side-up again. *"Whoever was doing it, had no reason to whatsoever,"* she said. *"It was a senseless killing".*

This is the kind of story that makes me feel like I have detoured onto the wrong planet.

We did not see any horseshoe crabs on this visit. They are a rare sight here now. I do not know if that is because people killed too many of them or because of the general deterioration of the ecosystem. Or maybe it is because of pesticide runoff, agricultural runoff, land development, pharmaceutical residues, or changing patterns of rainfall caused by development or climate change... Maybe the horseshoe crabs are sensitive to one of these, or maybe the creatures they eat are. Or it could be that the sensitive one is a microorganism that reproduces on a mollusc that lives on kelp that serves some important role in the food chain that feeds the horseshoe crab.

I feel quite sure that whatever the scientific explanation for the die-off of the horseshoe crabs and eels, the real reason is the senseless killing Stella described. I mean not so much the

Fig. 1. What does a horseshoe crab look like?

Credits: James St. John. URL: https://www.flickr.com/photos/jsjgeology/24605087516. License: CC-BY 2.0.

killing part, but the senseless part—the paralysis of our sensing function and the atrophy of our empathy.

The rush to a cause

The crabs and kelp and eels are all gone. The mind searches for the cause—to understand, to blame, and then to fix—but in a complex nonlinear system, it is often impossible to isolate causes.

This quality of complex systems collides with our culture's general approach to problem-solving, which is first to identify the cause, the culprit, the germ, the pest, the bad guy, the disease, the wrong idea, or the bad personal quality, and second to dominate, defeat, or destroy that culprit. Problem: crime; solution: lock up the criminals. Problem: terrorist acts; solution: kill the terrorists. Problem: immigration; solution: keep out the immigrants. Problem: Lyme Disease; solution: identify the pathogen and find a way to kill it. Problem: ignorance; solution: education. Problem: climate change; solution: reduce carbon emissions. Problem: obesity; solution: reduce caloric intake.

You can see from the above examples how reductionistic thinking pervades the entire political spectrum. When no proximate cause is obvious, we tend to feel uncomfortable, often hurrying then to find some convenient candidate for 'the cause' and going to war against that. Perhaps what we are facing in the multiple crises converging upon us is a breakdown in our basic problem-solving strategy, which itself rests on deeper narratives that I call 'The Story of Separation'. One of its threads is the idea that nature is something outside ourselves that is amenable to our control and that human progress consists in the endless expansion of that control.

Learning of the die-off of the estuary, I myself felt the impulse to find the culprit, to find someone to hate and something to blame. I wish solving our problems were that easy! If we could identify one thing as THE cause, the solution would be so much more accessible. But what is comfortable is not always true. What if the cause is a thousand interrelated things that implicate all of us and how we live? What if it is something so all-encompassing and so intertwined with life as we know it, that when we glimpse its enormity, we do not know what to do?

That moment of humble, powerless unknowing where the sadness of an ongoing loss washes through us and we cannot escape into facile solutioneering is a powerful and necessary moment. It has the power to reach into us deeply enough to wipe away frozen ways of seeing and ingrained patterns of

Fig. 2. What does an eel look like?

Credits: James St. John. URL: https://www.flickr.com/photos/jsjgeology/52520155186/in/photostream/. License: CC-BY 2.0.

response. It gives us fresh eyes, and it loosens the tentacles of fear that hold us in normality. The ready solution is like a narcotic, diverting attention from the pain without healing the wound.

You may have noticed this narcotic effect, the quick escape into *"let's do something about it"*. Of course, in those instances where cause and effect are simple and we know exactly what to do, then the quick escape is the right one. If you have a splinter in your foot, remove the splinter. But most situations are more complicated than that, including the ecological crisis on this planet. In such cases, the habit of rushing to the most convenient, superficially obvious causal agent distracts us from a more meaningful response. It prevents us from looking underneath that, and underneath that, and underneath that.

What is underneath the callous cruelty of those horseshoe crab flippers? What is underneath the massive use of lawn chemicals? What is underneath the huge suburban mansions? The system of chemical agriculture? The overfishing of the coastal waters? We get to the foundational systems, stories, and psychologies of our civilization.

Am I saying never to take direct action because, after all, the systemic roots are unfathomably deep? No. Where the unknowing, perplexity, and grief takes us is to a place where we can act on multiple levels simultaneously, because we see each dimension of cause within a bigger picture and we do not jump to easy, false solutions.

The mother of all causes

When I wondered about the cause of the estuary die-off, a hypothesis may have jumped into your mind—climate change, the culprit of the day for nearly every environmental problem. 'If we could identify one thing as THE cause, the solution would be so much more accessible'. For example, I googled 'effect of soil erosion on climate change,' and the first two pages of results showed the converse of my search—the effect of climate change on soil erosion.

The same for biodiversity. No doubt it is true that climate change exacerbates all kinds of environmental problems, but the rush to name a unitary cause for a complex problem should give us pause. The pattern is familiar. Do you think the 'fight against climate change', which starts by identifying an enemy, CO_2, will bring better results than the War on Terror, the War on Drugs, or the War on Poverty?

Now I am certainly not saying that eliminating fossil fuels is an 'easy, false solution'. It does not represent as thorough a change, however, as the change required to halt ecocide here, there, and everywhere. Conceivably, we could eliminate carbon emissions by finding alternative fuel sources to power industrial civilization. It may be unrealistic upon deeper investigation, but it is at least conceivable that our basic way of life could continue more or less unchanged. Not so for ecosystem destruction generally, which implicates every aspect of the modern way of life—mines, quarries, agriculture, pharmaceuticals, military technology, global transport, housing…

By the same token, the phenomenon of climate scepticism attests to the possibility of disbelieving in anthropogenic global warming entirely, since it requires that we unify multiple phenomena into a single theory that depends on the authority of scientists. No such faith is required to believe something has happened to the Narrow River estuary or one of the destroyed places from your own childhood. It is undeniable and has the power to penetrate us deeply whether we 'believe in' something or not.

It may sound like I am advocating refocusing on local environmental issues at the expense of climate change, but this is a false and dangerous distinction. As I have researched climate change, it has become increasingly apparent that the contribution of deforestation, industrial agriculture, wetlands destruction, biodiversity loss, overfishing, and other maltreatment of land and sea toward climate change is far greater than most scientists had believed. By the same token, the capacity of intact ecosystems to modulate climate and absorb carbon is much greater than had been appreciated. This means that even if we cut carbon emissions to zero, if we do not also reverse ongoing ecocide on the local level everywhere, the climate will still die a death of a million cuts.

Contrary to the presupposition implied in my aforementioned Google search results, the global depends on the health of the local. There may not be any global solution to the climate crisis, except to say that we need, globally, to restore and protect millions of local ecosystems. To focus on globally applicable solutions tends to diminish the importance of local environmental issues. We see that already with the growing identification of 'green' with 'low carbon'. We might, therefore, be wary of hurrying to implement globalized solutions that entail giving even more power to global institutions. Indeed, global carbon policies have already generated much ecological damage from hydroelectric and biofuel projects.

Again, am I advocating that we stop seeking to cut carbon emissions? No. But when we overemphasize that global factor, which fits so easily into our customary find-an-enemy approach to problem-solving, we risk overlooking the deeper matrix of causes and worsening the problem, just as our other 'Wars on (fill in the blank)' have done.

If everyone focused their love, care, and commitment on protecting and regenerating their local places, while respecting the local places of others, then a side effect would be the resolution of the climate crisis. If we strove to restore every estuary, every forest, every wetland, every piece of damaged and desertified land, every coral reef, every lake, and every mountain, not only would most drilling, fracking, and pipelining have to stop, but the biosphere would become far more resilient too.

But where do such love, care, courage, and commitment come from? It can only come from a personal relationship to the damage being suffered. That is why we need to tell stories like Stella's. We need to share our experiences of beauty, of sorrow, and of love for our land so as to infect others with the same. I am sure something stirred in you at Stella's words, even if your own childhood was in the mountains, not near oceans. When we transmit our love of earth, mountain, water, and sea to others, and stir the grief over what has been lost; when we hold ourselves and others in the rawness of it without jumping right away to reflexive postures of solution and blame, we are penetrated deep to the place where commitment lives. We grow in our empathy. We come back to our senses.

Is this 'the solution' to climate change? I am not offering it as a solution. Without it, though, no solution, no matter how cleverly designed a policy it may be, is going to work.

Key takeaways

- Ecosystem destruction implicates every aspect of the modern way of life.
- Since most local and global ecosystems are complex nonlinear systems, it is often impossible to isolate single causes for their destruction and for the global ecological crises.
- The nonlinearity of complex systems collides with our culture's general approach to problem-solving, which is to identify 'the' cause or culprit and to dominate, defeat, or destroy that culprit.
- This basic problem-solving strategy rests on a deeper narrative of separation. One of its threads is the idea that nature is something outside ourselves that is amenable to our control and human progress consists in the endless expansion of that control.
- One example of this approach to problem-solving is seen in the tendency to overemphasize the role of an isolated and superficially obvious global factor (like climate change) in the ecological crisis at the risk of ignoring its deeper matrix of causes (especially local ones).
- To resolve the ecological and climate crisis, each of us needs to focus our love, care, and commitment towards protecting and regenerating our local places, while respecting the local places of others.
- The commitment to protect and regenerate local places comes from a personal relationship to the ecological damage that they suffer. This personal relationship helps builds our empathy, which is the source of our commitment.

Notes:

1. This article was first published in July 2016 on https://charleseisenstein.org/about/. It is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License. This version has been edited in minor ways for relevance to the Indian context. It is published in i wonder... with the author's permission.
2. Source of the image used in the background of the article title: Estuary, Karnataka. URL: https://pxhere.com/en/photo/754282. License: CC0 Public Domain.

Charles Eisenstein is an American public speaker and author. His work covers a wide range of topics, including the history of human civilization, economics, spirituality, and the ecology movement. The key themes he explores include anti-consumerism, interdependence, and how myth and narrative influence culture. Charles can be contacted here: https://charleseisenstein.org/contact/.