

Human Beings Are People, Not Wildlife

In Niger, millions of people are starving:

"For Niger's nomads, the situation is desperate. To these people, losing your animals is like losing your life savings. Without their animals, they have no means of survival," said Natasha Kofoworola Quist, Oxfam's Regional Director for West Africa.

That is a bona fide emergency. But Oxfam has a **sinister** take on the problem:

"Twelve centuries of nomadic culture are threatened with extinction if these people do not get long-term help to rebuild their livelihoods," she added.

Niger's nomads are so poor that if a family loses a single animal they might die. Because they are nomads, they can't do simple things like store food or set up irrigation systems to save their cattle when it is very hot, which happens a lot in Niger. And they have been living and dying like this for twelve centuries! Haven't they suffered enough yet? Why should it be their role in life to satisfy the voyeuristic needs of Westerners who consider it of paramount importance that someone (other than their too valuable selves) be made to act out spasms of quaint desperation for ever and ever?

Of course the charitable folk are as keen as any game warden to save the lives of the half-people in their human game reserve. But heaven forfend that the inmates ever acquire the means to escape. So they want to tailor their 'help' in such a way that it saves the inmates' lives but leaves their cruel, foul predicament – delicately referred to as 'their unique nomadic culture' – unchanged and unchangeable.

We have a better idea. There's this new fangled thing called *agriculture*. Instead of tuning their policies to make people limp from crisis to crisis in appalling poverty just so that the relationship of benefactor and grateful supplicant can continue, let charities give money instead, and with it, access to knowledge that would allow the nomads out the wilderness. If their unique culture should fail to survive this challenge, then good riddance. Let it go to the hell from whence it came.

:)

-- Elliot Temple

<http://www.curi.us/>

by **Elliot Temple** on Sat, 08/20/2005 - 03:00 | [reply](#)

Guns, Germs, and Steel

While a useful comment, and true to some extent, there are considered fallacies to your argument.

Niger, long before it was Niger was supporting a small population of nomadic peoples with no help or charity from anyone else. There might have been occasional dry seasons, natural fluctuations in the viability of the land to support humans (and mammals and life in general), but this is the reason why nomadic cultures pick up their belongings and move. Such peoples survive and in their own way by their own means thrive.

The insertion of western civilization, agriculture, charity, technology, or whatever, is not necessary for human life to thrive in a place. Insertion is usually balanced at some near point by desertion. What is not near to us is not dear to us. What is near to us is dear to us, and only then we survive and thrive. Most of all, to be left alone to one's own creative devices and ingenuity is the prime need and what makes us human and adaptable. Mass starvation and famine would not be happening now, true, without all this prior interference.

Who needs or truly cares about Niger? Only the peoples that live upon the land.

Our feeble comments and platitudinal solutions are not needed, and often are especially short sighted and muddle minded. We have no stake in Niger and no business being there. Most people could not place it on a map of the globe within 100 km or have not one sense of its sustaining terrain. In terms of long term viability of humans in the region known as Niger, also, most of us have not a clue. Birth control in the polluted community wells is probably the only obvious humane long term solution other than a return to the natural cycles of birth, subsistence and death. But who would support such obvious interference, despite the multitude of less obvious but more dire interventions. I would choose the natural cycles of birth, subsistence and death over anything we do-gooders and social philosophers are proposing as an interference in region. It is likely more moral in the long run.

Perhaps full scholarships to Oxford for any Nigerian student showing academic promise on the condition that they return to their ravaged region would save more than a few lives in the long run. But that (education and real opportunity for self-determination) is another experimental question in itself. Nomadic peoples have formed nomadic cultures because it worked for them and the lands for at

least 100,000 years. If it no longer works (for them) it is because something we do has changed the order of things.

by a reader on Sat, 08/20/2005 - 15:50 | [reply](#)

It hasn't worked for them eve

It hasn't worked for them ever. Natural lives are not nice lives. They are brutal, short, hard, pain-filled, ugly, and unhappy. It's hard for us to imagine how horrible they are, because we know something completely different. We know what life can be like. We know something many orders of magnitude better than the people of Niger do. And now that they've heard of civilisation, they want it too. They do not want to return to their traditional painful existence that did not get better for thousands and thousands of years. We can help them to have something better, that they would prefer. And it'd be cheap for us to help (if only we helped in the right way), and it'd make the whole world (including us) richer.

-- Elliot Temple
<http://www.curi.us/>

by [Elliot Temple](#) on Sat, 08/20/2005 - 19:16 | [reply](#)

Cheap Help

The last sentence is verifiably true.

However, "they" is a wrong assumption. Just ask "them" and listen carefully to each person's answer. I dare you then to assume who "they" are and what "they" want ever again.

by a reader on Sun, 08/21/2005 - 01:55 | [reply](#)

What they want

One virtue of our suggestion (giving them only money and access to knowledge, without regard for the effect on their culture) is that it doesn't involve the giver, or anyone else apart from each individual recipient, deciding how they should live their lives.

However, it is uncontroversial that they would use the money and knowledge to change their way of life if they were free to do so. That is the whole point of Oxfam's having a policy of preventing them from doing so.

by [Editor](#) on Sun, 08/21/2005 - 02:19 | [reply](#)

"Niger, long before it was Ni

"Niger, long before it was Niger was supporting a small population of nomadic peoples with no help or charity from anyone else."

Is it just me or is "supporting" a hugely misleading term here? Suppose that for all of this long blissful free-of-Western-influence time, the life expectancy was 23 and infant death rate at 50%. Yet,

some fraction of people *did* survive to reproduce, generation after generation, and so, "the land was 'supporting' nomadic culture". Well BFD. That's good enough for those people, is it? "Supporting" is a trivial condition that means nothing more than "humans didn't die out completely there".

"The insertion of western civilization, agriculture, charity, technology, or whatever, is not necessary for human life to thrive in a place."

Sure helps.

"Insertion is usually balanced at some near point by desertion. What is not near to us is not dear to us. What is near to us is dear to us, and only then we survive and thrive."

Why then is a faraway group of peoples' 'native nomadic culture' so dear to Westerners half a world away?

"Who needs or truly cares about Niger? Only the peoples that live upon the land."

Says who? Speak for yourself. They are humans, I care about them. Moreover, Niger has certain natural resources which supply the rest of the world.

"Our feeble comments and platitudinal solutions are not needed"

Indeed.

"We have no stake in Niger and no business being there."

On the contrary, we have every 'stake' in Niger and "we" (if by "we" you refer to People From The West) have business dealings with people in Niger, specifically with regard to its natural resources. Do *you* know where Niger is, and about it?

"In terms of long term viability of humans in the region known as Niger, also, most of us have not a clue."

Agriculture would give us a more solid footing for, at least, making predictions in the "long term viability" department, methinks.

"I would choose the natural cycles of birth, subsistence and death over anything we do-gooders and social philosophers are proposing as an interference in region. It is likely more moral in the long run."

No 'teach a man to fish..' for you, is it. Course not, that would be "interference".

"If it no longer works (for them) it is because something we do has changed the order of things."

All the more reason...

p.s. What Elliot said

by blixax on Mon, 08/22/2005 - 03:05 | [reply](#)

Words not Deeds, or Words and Deeds

I have no doubt that you and several others "care" and so do I. So far caring has not been enough and various muddleheaded approaches for years have certainly not improved the lot of nomads in Niger much less the lot of peoples in sub-saharan Africa in general. Granted each situation and group is a different one, within Uganda, Zimbabwe, and so on, and for all the various tribes and peoples within.

The jury is out. We are alot closer on this than you might think. The point is that money and access to education and resources are key, rather than more lectures and back and forths on what should be done. I try to offer both and one person is only one drop in the bucket. Many persons are better.

We all must do much better. By "we" I mean everyone who has the interest to see real change, not just the next famine amelioration. And even with more attention and understanding of the real situations it will all be for naught if the affected peoples themselves, nomadic or not, do not have a direct hand in it.

by a reader on Mon, 08/22/2005 - 15:39 | [reply](#)

Oxfam Mauritania

Perhaps this is an example of a shared agricultural and educational resource.

http://www.oxfam.org.uk/what_we_do/where_we_work/mauritania/seedfair_learning.htm

by a reader on Mon, 08/22/2005 - 21:29 | [reply](#)

Oxfam Mauritania

It's about Oxfam *seed vouchers*. You're kidding, right? If not, go take your salary in seed vouchers and then get back to us about how educational it was.

by a reader on Mon, 08/22/2005 - 21:49 | [reply](#)

When I was farming

Seed vouchers were fine. Vouchers are a medium like money is a medium too. You can plant the seeds you want and grow crops and last I checked that was bonafide agriculture.

by a reader on Mon, 08/22/2005 - 23:43 | [reply](#)

Vouchers

If vouchers really are a medium like money, why does Oxfam give them vouchers and not money?

by [Editor](#) on Tue, 08/23/2005 - 01:35 | [reply](#)

Vouchers Do Not Equal Money

Harder to use seeds (so to speak) to buy prostitutes.

by a reader on Tue, 08/23/2005 - 02:14 | [reply](#)

You can't call a simple life bad.

Niger...

I have to say that people with a natural existence do not live bad lives or horrid lives for an eternity - they live simple lives, which is only different from a life in the west.

How can a way of life survive for thousands of years without happiness? Think about it - mothers tell their children about thier history, fathers come home at night after work, it is the same in all families and societies.

I know nothing of the niger people, but I do know of the indonesians - and those with simple lives are happy and fine, although they all want some of what they see on western television. Unless they are desperately poor, I liken this to a romantic view of westerners concerning faraway places.

Of course, the difference is that westerners can all afford to go, while most others in other countries cannot - however in this response, I am concerned here with the general quality of their lives.

My experience makes me agree with the view that only that which has been grown by ones oneself, or achieved alone has any value to that person or society - there are countless examples of given benefit in all countries that has been squandered, because of the careless way it has been introduced.

However, before a huge donation in aid, or a large education program, constantly there has been no slow buildup, or considered planning, or any opportunity of choice - personal power.

What seems as a novelty is often used and thrown away, no matter how expensive.

Naive it is to say that people in Africa would not desire money and objects from the west when they see them.

However, it is also naive to believe that a simple life without western commodities is worthless and brutal, when no experience of that life has been gained.

Bobby.

by Bobby Brown on Tue, 08/23/2005 - 11:17 | [reply](#)

Surviving Without Happiness

Bobby Brown wrote:

I have to say that people with a natural existence do not

live bad lives or horrid lives for an eternity - they live simple lives, which is only different from a life in the west.

How can a way of life survive for thousands of years without happiness? Think about it - mothers tell their children about their history, fathers come home at night after work, it is the same in all families and societies.

Any way of life can survive very easily without happiness as long as people don't know anything better. That, in fact, is how people survived throughout most of human history. As the World pointed out above these people are typically one farm animal away from death. Do you imagine that they don't worry about that? Here's another question for you to chew over. A nomad group must sometimes pass near a town or through it. Sometimes people in that nomad group must want to go to the town, or to stay there and not have to worry as much about food. So why don't they?

by [Alan Forrester](#) on Mon, 09/05/2005 - 13:20 | [reply](#)

Using this name instead of Bo

Using this name instead of Bobby Brown.

In response to your last question, humanity as it can be would probably not allow these nomads to settle in their village. In any poor country, large groups of people that haven't managed to get themselves money, no matter what harsh circumstances, would always be driven away by people that have homes - because there is hardly anything to share. Good hearted citizens in any society routinely turn their heads to human problems that are too great for them to solve.

The wealthy do not share either - if they gave to one, they would have to give to many. Anyway it's not their fault - it's how the country is run that's the problem, and they can't give openly, but through channels, charities (that I believe like so many people are corrupt as hell). We should understand that if they romantically open their doors, they would lose all of their privilege for some very temporary aid to admittedly quite a lot of people.

Neither would open their doors for essentially the same reason - personal loss - which means that my mention of the rich in a poor society is actually irrelevant.

I understand the situation my friend. I get you, I do, and I am a realist, but then again, I can't emphasize enough that happiness and love are essential to human existence... to the individual and to the whole, to society.

Societies which do not have love and happiness collapse. An evil society breaks down. It will destroy itself. Smaller societies I do not know about, but briefly, the Romans destroyed themselves through

laziness, expansion and too much power. The Nazis destroyed

themselves by madness, and again a desire for too much power.

Nomadic existence - a life which never tried to become large, never gathered in a way which was meant to subjugate other people. They are poor, they have nothing - how long have they lasted? 1200 years. The Roman army lasted from 31 BC - 1453. At this point, only three hundred years longer. The Roman empire was much larger than these Nomads - perhaps because the Nomads are smaller, they should have lasted a tiny amount of time compared to the Roman empire. Left alone, they would certainly survive much longer, although considering the effects of globalisation, this is unlikely.

Why did the Roman empire get larger and larger and larger? Why was it an unstoppable force - because it wanted fulfill itself in culture and and enrich itself with other races. At the beginning, if they were evil, it was only in the opinion that a cause of death is evil. But for a long time, when the Roman Empire was concerned with learning and knowledge and expansion, it was a vital growing thing. When it's emphasis shifted to control and power, and entertainment such as the arenas, then it was evil, destroyed itself, collapsed. Nazi Germany - in itself a very short lived society, and a mad rush for power. Any such thing is invariably CRUSHED OR FALLS APART INSTANTLY. This is the exact opposite of Nomadic existence that I have read about here, something that grew gradually from the people, something that was always there.

With the Nomadic existence - there must be something strong and vital inside it which is comparable with the beginnings and marvelous parts of the Roman empire. Their way of life must reside in their strength of movement. How do you think they keep going, while they are traveling, while they have so much hardship and pain? They love each other, and they find happiness within themselves, their families and their people - and their way of life. On their travels they must find things, and have a proud wandering tradition. They must know various African communities incredibly well, and have knowledge of the land and of the birds and the animals.

African history was once considered as a verbal recording, inside the minds of humans only. It is likely that most Nomads think of their history in the same way. It is likely that they are very proud of their knowledge of themselves and their existence.

The universe grows my friend, it doesn't rot and still manage to continue on its course of life. It grows.

These people must be sustained. They must be happy.

OF COURSE, as human begins they must desire freedom that some people have in this sad sad world and some people do not.... Certainly, like most people in the developing world, the Nomads self perception is corrupted by the west. Certainly, many would not like to be nomads anymore, and would like to have a car, and a home.

However, The concept that there are societies of people that do not

have happiness - This is wrong. Happiness is a natural emotion felt by human beings in the mind or in the soul. There are some sad people that have never known it, but never an entire society.

Looking at it this way - survival without happiness, actually cannot in fact be easy. A life like that would be very hard, it wouldn't be life at all. The society would attack each other constantly, would steal each other's animals. Would have no care. Nomads would not be a type of 'people', but individual scavengers, who hurt others, and steal constantly, from towns and offer no support to each other - an unhappy evil society. If that is what these people are, having lasted for 1200 years in this way, then my whole argument here is wrong.

Thanks, Daniel.

by DanielH on Wed, 10/19/2005 - 17:41 | [reply](#)

Life Expectancy

Daniel,
Do you think it would make them happier to live 70 years, rather than 30 years?

If everyone had their options explained to them, do you think you would rather have your children grow up with them, and live to 30 or so? Or do you think the parents of nomads would choose to have their children grow up in the United States and/or England? What do you honestly think?

More people do seem to want to immigrate to the United States from "third world" countries than the reverse....The proportions are remarkably different. I literally have never met someone who asked to live a nomadic life once it was explained to him just the diseases he would likely encounter and how long he would likely live.

Life expectancy isn't everything, but it does tell you about the relative ability of a person to meet his basic needs, something that is arguably very important to his own perception of whether he is happy (especially if a person living in a low life expectancy region knows about alternatives, so he can actively compare himself to those who are doing better from this perspective.)

Just curious.

Michael

by M Golding on Wed, 10/19/2005 - 20:23 | [reply](#)

Tut tut.

No, we're wildlife. If you can't handle that there are a number of religions available to you.

by Bill on Thu, 06/01/2006 - 11:55 | [reply](#)

Religions

Bill:

we're wildlife. If you can't handle that there are a number of religions available to you

The idea that morality in general (or in this case, drawing a moral distinction between humans and other animals) is tantamount to religion, is a concession that many atheists make to the religious. But it is a mistake, no more coherent than it would be to concede that epistemology or metaphysics, or for that matter physics, is tantamount to religion.

You may enjoy thinking of yourself as wildlife, but I myself am a **mineral**, and I challenge you to find the flaw my argument to that effect. It is the same as the flaw in yours.

by **David Deutsch** on Thu, 06/01/2006 - 12:19 | [reply](#)

Already with the straw man ar

Already with the straw man arguments!

People are nothing 'special', by any detached/objective view. The distinction we make is a subjective one (which is why we invent God to make it for us).

Not being a narcissist, I don't particularly 'enjoy' thinking of myself as anything.

I find no flaw in your mineral argument, though I find a flaw in it being called 'satire'.

by Bill on Thu, 06/01/2006 - 16:51 | [reply](#)

Re: Already with the straw man

You say people are wildlife, and you say you find no flaw in an argument that people are minerals. Well, which is it? Are people wildlife or mineral life?

-- Elliot Temple

My Blog

by **Elliot Temple** on Fri, 06/02/2006 - 06:56 | [reply](#)

People are people

And mineral. And wildlife.

If you can't see that, I really can't help you.

by Bill on Fri, 06/02/2006 - 10:27 | [reply](#)

Re: People are people

When you previously claimed people are wildlife, what did you

mean?

-- Elliot Temple

My Blog

by **Elliot Temple** on Fri, 06/02/2006 - 16:12 | [reply](#)

People are wildlife

People are members of a primate species we designate H. sapiens. They are not some special non-animal category of beings.

The trouble with most of those who mock environmentalism is that they don't understand this. They think that humans have somehow transcended nature and the laws of physics.

by **Yoni** on Sun, 09/10/2006 - 11:24 | [reply](#)

Re: People are wildlife

People are not a "special non-animal category of things" in the same sense as animals are not a special non-atom category of things. That is to say, in the reductionist (or essentialist) sense.

However, animals have emergent properties that are not captured by describing them as atoms. The theory of evolution, for instance, is not needed to explain why the sun is hot, but it is needed to explain why giraffes have long necks - even though those necks consist entirely of atoms.

Likewise humans have emergent properties that are not captured by describing them as animals. The most prominent of these are human consciousness and human knowledge creation. But the one that is relevant to our discussion here is the moral values of humans. One can explain the behaviour of animals without ever referring to a distinction between right and wrong, or between what ought to be and what is. That is not so for humans.

by **Editor** on Sun, 09/10/2006 - 12:06 | [reply](#)

Re: Humans have transcended the laws of physics?

By 'transcended', do you mean violated?

If so, could you give an example of where something we have said implies that a law of physics has been violated (and state that law)?

If you mean something else by 'transcended', what makes you think that laws of physics cannot be 'transcended' in your sense?

by **Editor** on Sun, 09/10/2006 - 12:12 | [reply](#)

