

Making Ripples

New Year, New Nature: Expecting the Unexpected

by Amanda Bancroft

Most people go through life expecting that the only certainty is that nothing is certain, to quote Pliny the Elder. Even belief in an intervening deity doesn't mean (most) people think they can read the omnipotent being's mind and anticipate their will. But nature seems reliable. Volatile, certainly, but as reliable as the sun coming up each morning. That reputation has been changing, and 2017 brings a mystery: how will people experience nature in the next year and beyond?

We expect to be able to breathe the air, drink the water, see certain kinds of trees in our neighborhood, and experience the seasons in a predictable way. If spring has been rainy in our area for as long as anyone can remember, we typically expect that future springs will bring rain, not drought. Safe tap water is generally the norm, but recent events have proven that we can't take water for granted anymore. Environmental disasters have been taking place since before humans existed, but these days we experience more of them, like dominoes stacked against our expectations.

The world of native species and ecosystems has been giving way to a globalized nature. Some of the trees and wild harvests which our grandparents grew up collecting in various parts of the country are no longer around due to various causes. The wildlife looks a bit different, particularly if you're in Chicago riding a subway with a coyote. The migrating type of Monarch butterflies and summer fireflies may not be around forever. Invasive, non-native species are creating an uncertain future for some beloved native species.

The National Park system celebrated its one hundredth anniversary this year, the same year they announced that the parks as we experience them today won't look the same to future generations due to climate change, rising sea levels, and die-offs of familiar giant trees and certain photogenic wildlife. Park employees have long recognized that regardless of whether the public agrees with the scientific consensus on climate change, it's still their job to figure out what to do when a famous glacier has already melted or an icon is about to disappear under water.

No matter what we do, there will come a day when the sun dies and Earth as we know it goes with it. Change in nature is inevitable, whether it's an ice age or complete loss of life on the planet. So we can't keep everything the same forever. Is it worth it to try and preserve what we can? Long ago, some said no, and it's unfathomable to think what we could have had today if they'd felt differently. Some said yes, and courtesy of their preservation work, we experience beauty, health, and outdoor recreation in a scattering of places. Everything of today is descended from the past. While the world is finite, each day of health in humans and nature is numbered not only because of death but also because it is worthy of being counted. Today counts.

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