

William R. Catton, Jr.

1926–2015

A Tribute by Family Members

March 2015

William R. Catton, Jr. sought to teach the world that civilization as we know it cannot continue because of the environmental impacts that are occurring. Modern *Homo sapiens* has turned into *Homo colossus*, a species with unparalleled resource needs and deleterious effects on its habitat. As the human population now far exceeds the human carrying capacity of the planet, the question facing civilization is a stark one. Will the adjustment come as a deliberate/traumatic downsizing of per capita consumption, a deliberate reduction in the human birth rate, or traumatic increases in the human death rate? Realism enforces that one or a combination of these is inevitable.

Bill Catton died suddenly on January 5, 2015, at the age of 88, while visiting family in New Zealand. In the weeks after his death, touching tributes by many have been paid to his intellectual legacy. The present brief remembrance is a sketch by family members of his intellectual development.

Bill Catton's professional career as a sociologist spanned nearly four decades. He was a professor of sociology at the University of Washington from 1957 to 1969, taught at the University of Canterbury in Christchurch, New Zealand from 1970 to 1972, and completed his academic career at Washington State University in Pullman from 1973 to 1989. A prolific research scholar, his published writings include more than 100 articles and three books. His best-known work is *Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change* (1980). Throughout his 25 years of retirement, he continued to research, write, and give invited lectures. He was honored to speak at a symposium in Valencia, Spain as recently as 2013. As one student of his ideas eulogized, "Catton was an inspiration to a host of climate change, peak oil, and sustainability-oriented leaders, including many of those who participated in 'The Future Is Calling Us to Greatness.'"¹

Bill Catton was born on January 15, 1926, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, the son of a Congregational minister. The family was education-minded, politically progressive, and tight-knit. In February 1943, at the age of 17, Bill volunteered for the Navy to fight in World War II. His father, a veteran of World War I, followed Bill into the service as a Navy chaplain. Bill was assigned to the aircraft carrier *U.S.S. Ticonderoga*, and participated in combat operations in the western Pacific, where he was wounded in a deadly kamikaze attack on the ship. Later, after the surrender of Japan, he suffered severe injury in a shipboard accident that put him in hospital for six months. These experiences imbued him with a lifelong appreciation for his great good luck to be alive.

¹ Rev. Michael Dowd, "William R. Catton, Jr. (1926-2015)," *Huffington Post*, February 9, 2015 at www.huffington.post.com/rev-michael-dowd/rip-william-r-catton-jr_1_b_6632206.html.

After discharge from the Navy, Bill went to Oberlin College on the G.I. Bill. There, he met Nancy Lewis, and the two married in 1949. Bill graduated from Oberlin College in 1950 with an A.B. degree, and went on to pursue graduate studies in sociology at the University of Washington, earning an M.A. in 1952 and a Ph.D. in 1954. While getting established as an academic sociologist, Bill Catton worked for the Rand Corporation for one year and had one-year teaching appointments at Reed College and the University of North Carolina. These were also the years he and Nancy started a family. Altogether they had four sons, born in 1954, 1956, 1960, and 1964.

Making his home in Washington State with his young family, Catton formed an abiding passion for mountain wilderness. He enjoyed camping, backpacking, outdoor photography, and visiting the national parks. He loved Washington's Mount Rainier National Park above all. Four times, he and Nancy hiked the 93-mile Wonderland Trail around Mount Rainier, the first two times in the mid 1960s with a different three-year-old son in tow on each occasion. He greatly admired the U.S. national parks in all of their attributes as nature preserves, recreational playgrounds, and outdoor schools of ecology.

From an early stage in his professional career, Catton was interested in sociological theory and the history of sociological thought. He was predisposed to think in terms of big ideas and was inclined to seek new perspectives from outside the discipline. With his first book, *From Animistic to Naturalistic Sociology* (1966), he sought to move sociology in the direction of the natural sciences.

In the 1960s, Catton worked with researchers John Hendee of the Forest Service and Frank Brockman of the University of Washington College of Forest Resources on sociological research pertaining to wildlands recreation management. Together with J. Alan Wagar and others, they took the biological sciences concept of carrying capacity and applied it to the social environment of campgrounds and backcountry hiking trails. Catton's research on recreational carrying capacity in the national parks formed the seedbed from which his ideas about human carrying capacity on a global scale later germinated.

Those ideas began to sprout in the early 1970s, when Catton was at the University of Canterbury. In January 1970, Catton emigrated with his family to Christchurch, New Zealand to escape a constellation of trends in the United States that he found extremely disheartening: environmental degradation, social fragmentation, escalating television violence, drug culture, student radicalism with resulting dysfunction in the academy, and no end in sight to the Vietnam War imbroglio. In New Zealand, Catton found a society that was in some ways refreshingly reminiscent of an earlier time in America. In 1971, he wrote: "In the fifteen months I have lived in New Zealand so far, I have heard New Zealanders frequently referring to America in terms that suggest it is something like a giant early warning radar set....What is happening now in America portends future developments down here – unless...."² Yet somewhat to his own dismay, Catton found

² William R. Catton, Jr., "Sociology in the 1970s," *The Australian and New Zealand Journal of Sociology* 7: 2 (September 1971), 89.

New Zealand was by and large following the ill-advised patterns that America had shown earlier – as, for example, in its policies to encourage population growth.

During three years in New Zealand, Catton enjoyed the spaciousness and serenity of New Zealand's ten, lightly developed national parks, and took pride in giving his family a sort of second shot in what he liked to call "The Age of Exuberance." Yet, he came to see the myriad societal problems that had driven him to leave the U.S. as actually more global and inexorable than he had previously thought. The experience led him to his big question: "Has the evolutionary process produced, in *Homo sapiens*, a permanent viable member of the global ecosystem, or has it spawned another of its many abortive variants?" Or, put another way, "*Does man's unique capacity for culture exempt him from extinction, or, quite the contrary, is it going to ensure his extinction?*"³

Catton started writing *Overshoot* while in New Zealand. The book begins with a kind of parable (a teaching method he owed to listening to his father's sermons while growing up).

On the banks of the Volga in 1921 a refugee community was visited by an American newspaper correspondent who had come to write about the Russian famine. Almost half the people in this community were already dead of starvation. The death rate was rising. Those still surviving had no real prospect of prolonged longevity. In an adjacent field, a lone soldier was guarding a huge mound of sacks full of grain. The American newsman asked the white-bearded leader of the community why his people did not overpower this one guard, take over the grain, and relieve their hunger. The dignified old Russian explained that the sacks contained seed to be planted for the next growing season. "We do not steal from the future," he said.⁴

Catton's argument in *Overshoot* is that the Earth's human population has already overshoot its human carrying capacity and is, in effect, stealing from the future. This has been able to happen because recent technological advances have at once created an illusion of unlimited abundance, while actually decreasing our maximum permanently supportable load, by driving the human population into an ever-increasing reliance on finitely available resources. By failing to make the crucial distinction between developments that genuinely increased the Earth's human carrying capacity (such as the initial invention of agriculture) and those that can supplement our lives only temporarily (namely, reliance on fossil fuels), we have created a state of competition between our own well-being and that of those who follow us. And in this competition, the imbalance of power is total.

A hallmark of Catton's work in *Overshoot* was his use of colorful terms to build the conceptual framework required for his argument. Building on the crucial term, *carrying*

³ Ibid, 84.

⁴ William R. Catton, Jr., *Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), 3.

capacity, Catton employed such additional terms as: *ghost acreage* for the additional farmland a country would require in order to meet its overall resource needs sustainably, *phantom carrying capacity* for that portion of a population load that cannot be permanently supported when temporarily available resources become unavailable, *drawdown* for the use of non-renewable resources (temporarily allowing life opportunities to exceed the carrying capacity), and *overshoot* for the condition of a population load having – necessarily temporarily – exceeded the carrying capacity.

Some of the most vivid sequences of *Overshoot* are a reworking of familiar history within the conceptual framework of human ecology. To Catton, the “exuberant” self-conception of the youthful America, which found expression in its ideological politics, had as much to do with the extravagant ecological superabundance of the vast, lightly populated New World as with more traditional social and historical explanations. In another chapter, Catton points out that much like a chain, which is only as strong as its weakest link, the carrying capacity of any local ecosystem is limited by its scarcest essential resource (Liebig’s law). Trade has allowed human communities to exceed their local carrying capacities, by exporting locally abundant resources in exchange for locally scarce ones. The Great Depression, essentially a breakdown in the global systems of trade, brought this fact into stark relief. As hungry city-dwellers flocked back into the countryside, temporarily reversing the longer arc of urbanization, they were retreating from local ecosystems whose carrying capacities had been overshot.

While still preparing *Overshoot* for publication, Catton wrote numerous articles pushing a new ecological paradigm for sociology. Some of these articles he co-authored with WSU colleague Riley Dunlap. The productive collaboration with Dunlap continued into the 1980s. After *Overshoot* was published, Catton’s writing focused on trying to hammer home his central message. In essence, Catton wanted to bring people around to a realistic, steely-eyed vision of humanity’s blighted future, or as he said:

to recognize that our lifestyles, mores, institutions, patterns of interaction, values, and expectations are shaped by a cultural heritage that was formed in a time when carrying capacity exceeded the human load. A cultural heritage can outlast the conditions that produced it. That *carrying capacity surplus* is gone now, eroded both by population increase and immense technological enlargement of per capita resource appetites and environmental impacts. Human life is now being lived in an era of deepening *carrying capacity deficit*. All of the familiar aspects of human societal life are under compelling pressure to change in this new era when the load increasingly exceeds the carrying capacities of many local regions – and of a finite planet. Social disorganization, friction, demoralization, and conflict will escalate.⁵

In retirement, Catton continued to pursue big ideas. Returning to his earlier interest in the history of sociological thought, he sought to revise the great French sociologist Émile

⁵ William R. Catton, Jr., “A Retrospective View of My Development as an Environmental Sociologist,” 21:4 (December 2008), 475.

Durkheim's theory on the division of labor in light of the new ecological paradigm. This ambitious effort culminated in his last book, *Bottleneck: Humanity's Impending Impasse* (2009). In the meantime, Catton became an avid student of Charles Darwin, amassing a private library of books about Darwin and the various debates over evolution from Darwin's day to ours. It was no wonder that Darwin, so radical a thinker in his time, became Catton's intellectual hero.

Notwithstanding his assessment of the outlook for the planet, Bill Catton always retained a strikingly positive disposition, a ready sense of humor, and an exuberant spirit. To Bill, family held the greatest meaning. He exalted wilderness. He esteemed reason, of the kind that fosters science. He was by nature a teacher. His family cherishes his spirit and the times that they had with him.