



Ann Scheid

The 21st Century Ragnarok: Is Profit Civilization's Only Motive?

Ann Scheid, a Pittsburgh native, grew up in a family dedicated to letters and was constantly distressed about the environment in that area. After moving to California, she received a B.A. and M.A. in English and taught writing at several local two- and four-year colleges. A social and environmental activist since the 1960s, Scheid often has written on social matters ranging from overpopulation to the destruction of the rainforest. In the following essay, Scheid paints an apocalyptic (doomsday) picture of life on earth for future generations as we move into the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Pre-reading Questions

1. What do you consider "pollution"? Jot down as many types of pollution as you can, and share your list with your classmates. How were your responses similar and yet different?
2. Do you believe that the human race is capable of preserving planet earth or destined to destroy it? Why?
3. List any images that come to mind when you read the word "Ragnarok." Then, look up the term online or in a dictionary of mythic terms.

Human beings are an irritant to Mother Nature, and in spite of the fact that it took their brains five million years to evolve, She can rid Herself of them in an instant. This, however, may not be necessary, since humans seem to be racing to see if they can save Her the trouble. They behave so arrogantly, contending they are superior to Nature. Rain forests are being cut down or burned—not only polluting the air but also causing a drop in oxygen levels. The love affair people have with their automobiles, especially "gas hog" SUVs, adds to the pollutants in the air and is, yet, another nail in their coffins. Since prehistoric times, humans

have been stalking and killing animals, causing many, beginning with the mastodon and saber-toothed tiger, to become extinct. Modern civilization is rushing headlong to slaughter animals in wholesale lots, all the while trying to prove its superiority to Mother Nature, usually with disastrous results.

2 For thousands of years, humans also have been defacing the earth, making scars upon the land. The Vikings overpopulated their own lands and thus depleted the natural resources, which caused them to look for new areas to take advantage of. They then moved on to Iceland, Greenland, and the New World. Also, the throngs of people who responded to the lure of gold in the Yukon totally stripped mountainsides of trees above the Yukon River to make rafts in order to sail 500 miles to Dawson. Forty percent never made it! In the populated areas of the Himalayas very few trees remain since the citizens have cut them down for cooking and heating fires. With most of the trees gone, erosion occurs on a large scale, washing away most of the topsoil, making food production difficult. Even more disturbing is the fact that, due to large-scale cutting, the famous cedars of Lebanon, mentioned in the Bible, no longer exist. Along the same lines, so much of the rain forest in Panama is being destroyed that scientists are predicting the Panama Canal could fill with silt, thus prohibiting ships from crossing the isthmus, due to the effects of deforestation.

3 Deforestation and erosion, along with changing weather patterns, have led to the fastest-growing regions on this planet—deserts. All the while, populations are exploding worldwide and the proliferation of deserts means there is less arable land to feed the increasing number of people. Starvation on a massive scale will run rampant and whenever a noted ecologist or environmentalist sends out warnings about such dangers to human life, very few consider giving up any of their conveniences. For instance, the holes in the ozone layer are getting larger, allowing more ultraviolet rays to hit the Earth, which often leads to skin cancer. Knowing this fact, many people still do nothing about the emissions that cause this to happen. They insist on using aerosols and traveling one-to-a-car, thus adding to the emissions, which cause the ozone holes to expand, leading to more cases of skin cancer—a vicious cycle, indeed.

4 To make matters even more critical, global warming is becoming an ever-increasing threat to the existence of humans and animals. Polar ice caps are melting, and sections the size of the state of Rhode Island are breaking off. Traveling toward the Temperate Zones, they begin to melt, placing an inordinate amount of fresh water into the oceans and causing an imbalance. In the North Atlantic, this would affect the Gulf Stream, which warms the British Isles. The fresh water would force the salt water to greater depths and inhibit the flow of the Gulf Stream. Great Britain would be plunged into an ice age, killing many animals and, undoubtedly,

causing a mass exodus south. Sea levels also would rise; countries, such as The Netherlands and Bangla Desh would be flooded since both of them are at exactly sea level or below. The people who flee from these areas, along with those from the British Isles, would further crowd the remaining lands. It is predicted that sea level could rise 200 feet in the future, thus wiping out all coastal areas around the world, forcing more people to move inland.

⁵ Humans further complicate their lives by allowing businesses to release pollutants in urban areas, in the name of profit. "Accidents" often take place at refineries where toxic fumes are released into the air that people and animals breathe. Pesticides are so widely used and pose such a threat that it is amazing all of them haven't been banned. When DDT was sprayed on plants, many birds died as a result. It was taken out of circulation, but even more powerful ones have been developed. The farming industry uses great amounts of pesticides. The toxins leach into the soil and contaminate the ground water. In California's Central Valley farm workers and their families have a higher rate of birth defects and cancer than areas not using pesticides. Chemical companies beside rivers are allowed to release their toxins into the water. In Southwestern Pennsylvania, it was discovered that the temperature of the water below such a factory was 183 degrees—in January! Another time that same river was so polluted that the chemicals on the surface caught fire! Even more disastrous is the fact that the area uses water from that river for drinking.

⁶ Governments, anxious to appease money-hungry corporations and their stockholders, have allowed timber companies into national forests to cut virgin-growth trees. Most of these businesses clear cut vast areas and often wait an inordinate amount of time to replant. Clear cutting leaves another scar upon the land in their most treasured and scenic areas and also leads to erosion. At the same time, the government is also considering giving permission for oil companies to drill in those sacred lands. Their rigs are hideously ugly and will mar the views for every visitor. Clear cutting and oil drilling also will interfere with the habitats of animals which inhabit our national parks and forests.

⁷ One corporation that is particularly guilty of abusing the environment is British Petroleum (BP). Before the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, a gigantic explosion occurred at their Texas City refinery in 2005, killing 15 people and injuring 170 others. Also, two weeks prior to the Gulf spill, BP admitted that malfunctioning equipment released over 530,000 pounds of chemicals into the air over that city. In 1999, one of BP's subsidiaries, BP Exploration Alaska (BPXA), illegally dumped hazardous wastes on the Alaska North Slope and was fined 22 million dollars. From 1993-95, BPXA failed to report illegally dumping waste oil,

paint thinner, and other toxic and hazardous substances by releasing them down the outer rim of the oil wells.

⁸ Apparently, BP can get away with any infraction against the environment and the citizens who make a living from it. The Gulf spill was so large that it put 12,000 people out of work, and, yet, those same people begged the U. S. government not to stop drilling in the Gulf. Not only were their lives threatened, but many wildlife species, including whales, tuna, and shrimp, dozens of species of birds, and land animals, such as, grey fox and white-tailed deer, and also amphibians, such as the alligator and the snapping turtle came under duress. Not only was oil leaked into the ocean, but also millions of gallons of dispersant were sprayed on the spill to break it up.

⁹ It is obvious how little BP cares about the environment of the United States. This became even more evident by the CEO, Tony Hayward's, reaction to pressures being applied by the government when he said, "I want my life back." He even took some time off to sail his yacht in a race in England. Fortunately, he was relegated to Siberia to work on Russian pipeline problems, but, at the same time, since 30% of the nation's oil production is derived from the Gulf of Mexico, the government has approved a number of offshore gulf drilling operations since the spill, and BP has been awarded two of them.

¹⁰ Experts have estimated that 200 species of plants and animals become extinct each day. This, for instance, can be caused by over fishing, either by enormous processing ships that scoop up thousands of fish at a time and freeze them at sea, or by fishing fleets. The U.S. Navy has contributed to the deaths of whales and dolphins with its new sonar. Marine biologists have examined the dead animals, and their ears had hemorrhaged, making them deaf and killing most of them. In the past, ranchers and farmers have contributed to the demise of the wolf in the lower 48 states when they were offered money for each wolf carcass produced. One of the most shameful acts committed by humans was the killing of millions of buffalo in the mid-1800s—for sport. People would shoot them from trains, and the animals would rot by the tracks. No one used the animals for clothes or food.

¹¹ One hundred fifty years later, there are only a few buffalo alive, and coral reefs, which are composed of skeletons secreted by certain marine polyps, are beginning to experience the same fate. Due to a change in temperature in the oceans, pollutants, and the looting of coral by "collectors," ten percent of the reefs are now dead. By 2020, fifty percent will have died if nothing is done, yet divers think only of the profit they will make from the coral jewelry, and polluters think only of the money they will save by not disposing of toxics properly, and factories think only of not having to spend money to purify the emissions.

- 12 Burning questions never cease: When will governments—local, state, and federal—corporations, and the rest of the human race realize what is happening to this planet? When will the race for profit cease to consume them? Perhaps it will come about when there is no land left to farm and feed the burgeoning population, or there is no clean water left to drink, or wildlife to balance the ecosystem, or, more importantly, when their children start dying. By that time, however, it probably will be too late.

Postreading Questions

Content

1. Identify the thesis in Scheid's essay. How does it provide the guiding focus for her discussion?
2. How have humans defaced the earth and destroyed its life forms? How long has this been a pattern of human behavior toward Nature? What examples does Scheid use to illustrate her argument?
3. To whom does the author seem to be appealing?
4. What could happen as a result of global warming and melting polar icecaps?
5. According to Scheid, how many species of plant and animal life become extinct each day?

Strategies and Structures

1. Explain the strategic purpose and ultimate effect of capitalizing the "m" and "n" in Mother Nature, as well as Scheid's upper case pronoun references such as "She" and "Her"
2. Scheid cites several authorities, facts, and statistics as she presents her argument. Which supporting information do you find most and least convincing? Why?
3. Scheid writes her essay using third person point of view; why is this most appropriate to her subject matter and objective for writing her essay? What might have been lost if she had chosen to write the same essay from a first or second person point of view? Explain your reasoning.
4. How does the author create and reinforce the believability of her thesis through the extensive use of historical and current examples of the human race's interaction with the environment and its creatures?
5. Why do you imagine that Scheid decided to offer her readers two rhetorical questions in the final paragraph before the concluding remarks to her essay? What is she inviting the reader to do?

Language and Vocabulary

1. Vocabulary: *Ragnarok, apocalyptic, iritant, inordinate, ecosystem, arrogantly, depleted, erosion, isthmus, deforestation, arable, ultraviolet rays, exodus, pollutants, burgeoning, proliferation, rampant,*

- ozone, aerosol, gigantic, malfunctioning, subsidiaries, infraction, dispersant, relegated, sonar, hemorrhaged, polyps, emissions.* Most of the vocabulary words for this essay fall into one of two categories: general vocabulary words, and those words which specifically illustrate and explain the topic at hand: threats to the environment. After looking up the vocabulary words in your dictionary, separate them into the appropriate groups, and write one pro and one con (if possible) paragraph about the threat to the environment.
2. Write a one-page summary of Scheid's essay using the vocabulary words listed in the Language and Vocabulary exercise number one.

Group Activities

1. Visit your college or university's Department of Environmental Studies, Natural Sciences, or Anthropology in small groups and interview faculty members. Prior to your visit, however, prepare a list of scripted interview questions or follow the advice of Kathleen Hudson in her essay, "Why Talk? Interviews Matter!" (*Chapter 6: Process Analysis*). Present your findings to the rest of the class in an oral presentation.
2. Go to a computer-assisted classroom, pair off, and research one aspect of an environmental problem facing modern society. Before engaging in research, make sure that every pair in class explores a different issue. For example, one pair might research the issue of global warming; another pair might look into articles on the dwindling Amazon rainforests, and so on. Print your findings and write a collaborative essay with your partner, citing sources when appropriate. Finally, staple all your printed articles to your collaborative essay, and submit it to your instructor.

Writing Applications

1. Using illustration and example, develop an essay showing what readers can do to become environmentally conscientious.
2. Write a letter to a local or federal government official using illustration and example to argue how and why he/she is or is not doing a good job fighting for issues that affect the world around us (e.g., promoting bills encouraging practices to decrease the greenhouse effect, to safeguard wildlife habitats, to protect the planet from needless destruction, and so on), or to point out a clear need for immediate action.