



CARL SAFINA

# TOO Big TO FAIL

## **WHAT DO THE OCEAN AND THE MORTGAGE CRISIS HAVE IN COMMON?**

Not in parallel. I mean: what same exact thing has created overfishing, declining coral reefs, pollution, global warming and has also created the mortgage crisis? I'll work my way back to that question. But first I want to say, for those who don't know me, that I am a scientist and naturalist, a person who looks through binoculars, but also who uses nature directly, by fishing for food and cutting wood for heat. So autumn is an exciting season.

## WHEN WE KEEP WHAT WE LIKE and discard what we don't, we're privatizing profits and socializing costs.

In the migrations of birds and monarch butterflies, in the fish and whales that come and go along our coast, we feel the driving energy inspiring all living things to strive to survive. Despite the constant drumbeat of environmental *gloom and doom* – I'm continually struck by how much beauty and vitality the world still holds.

Yet in my travels, from tropical islands to the polar regions, I see problems facing people *and* a natural world being depleted. The gloomy forecasts also do ring true. While earlier writers could extol wilderness, nowadays it's hard to follow animal tracks without coming quickly to the human footprint. Bigfoot is out there after all.

This is the contrast in my work; nature's seasons, and my coastal sense of place, indicate a world still brimming with life, a world in which we can still find sanity and solace, delight and hope and perhaps enough resilience to keep the world alive for those who will follow us. And yet I see a world in which people have not yet realized that nature, civilization, peace, and the human spirit are *facets of the same stone*.

So speaking of stone, back to the earlier question: what root cause do the ocean's problems and the mortgage crisis have in common? Here's what I think: since the

first human chipped the first stone tool, we have always kept what we liked and discarded what we didn't want. This was fine when our garbage was stones and bones. But we are still using the same million-year-old system, even though our leavings are no longer stones and bones, but cancer chemicals, empty oceans, stumps of thousand-year-old trees, melting polar ice, and unpaid mortgage debt.

When we keep what we like and discard what we don't, we're privatizing profits and socializing costs. We make others pay for our mistakes. This has become so familiar that now banks say, "Keep me profitable by paying me for my worthless assets. Save my assets, buy my garbage." To see how preposterous this is, imagine it in reverse. Imagine if, a few years ago, a treasury secretary proposed that the banks give the treasury an unexpected \$700 billion toward off-setting the federal debt! It would never happen.

We're all tied in to networks we have never understood. But we've been tied together for a long time: the shared air and water, our seas and fish. We all pay. We'll make people who are not even born yet, pay. What physics and ecology have taught us, evolution has taught us, and even the golden rule tried to teach us: there is no free lunch, we are woven into the same social fabric, strands in the same net of life.



“ We’ve been tied together for a long time: the shared air and water, our seas and fish. We all pay. We’ll make people who are not even born yet pay. ”



“Let’s celebrate our love for the ocean. And that is a realm that really is too big to fail. We won’t let it.”

And although global warming is the overarching environmental problem of our time, it was still possible in a presidential campaign to convey energy policy in the chanted slogan, “Drill, baby, drill.” Even though the costs will be socialized because we are not making the energy options we’ll all need, for a future we’ll all wish our kids could have had. Drill baby drill?

America once got its energy from slaves. If ever energy was cheap, slavery was it. I can imagine slave owners chanting, “Raid, baby, raid.” We fought each other over who should profit, and who should pay the costs. The war over slavery was a war over the morality of cheap energy. And that is what the debate over renewable energy really is.

A declining Rome chanted “Bread and circuses.” Part of America chants: Drill baby drill. It’s all one thing: a destructive insistence on more of the same, even when it’s been too much for too long. It is a spoiled child chanting, “More, mommy, more.”

At some point, the child, the plantation owner, the polluter, the fishing boat captain, the lender and the borrower, must become grownups, threads that strengthen the whole social fabric, not pull the rug from those who will come next.

We are told collapsing companies are too big to fail. But they have failed. They were too big to succeed! Why did the people who ran these institutions fail them? Why do we, so systematically, make decisions that go against the long-term interest of people, of other living things? Because we are still using the same system devised when we were chipping stones and stripping bones.

Our economic system teaches us that the part of the process that is the product gets a price, and the rest (basically the waste and consequences) is external to the market. This ancient mode of pricing mistakes the value of resources, the costs of waste, the value of waste products, and the risk of depletion, whether we’re depleting the ocean or depleting the incomes of mortgage holders tempted into reckless loans they could never afford.

We’re no longer discarding just stone chips and pottery shards. Yet the way we do business has not caught up to new realities. We run our civilization on institutions developed in ancient times, when no one knew the world was round and finite. Our economic system was developed centuries ago. Our religions: centuries ago. The philosophies underlying Western thought: thousands of years old.

Yet only in the last few decades have we understood how all life is biologically related. Only in the last few decades are we understanding the carbon and nitrogen cycles, dynamics of animal populations, the replenishment rates of groundwater.

Our understanding of how the world really works is very new and unfolding. None of our institutions incorporate modern understanding into how we do business. Our modes of conduct are so out of sync with how the world actually works, they’re essentially irrational. That is why we keep making choices that threaten both the economy of nature and our monetary economy. Each time the science of ecology tightens a coil in the slack of our knowledge, it further emphasizes its fundamental discovery: connection. Because the greatest thing a

human being can experience is a sense of connection, there is a joyful coincidence here. It means that what we need to do is what our soul and spirit tell us they want us to do: connect, connect, connect.

## THE BANKRUPTCY OF NATURE

will be the end of our quest for peace. For us, it’s suicide. For our children, it is murder.

And while we may learn valuable lessons in failed banks, our biggest institutions – the life support systems of our planet – truly cannot be allowed to fail. The bankruptcy of nature will be the end of our quest for peace. For us, it’s suicide. For our children, it is murder. So let’s agree not to murder our children – even our teenagers.

We must institutionalize what we are coming to understand about the relationship between what we want, and what we do; between environment, poverty and peace; between compassion and the human spirit.

Now tonight we are here to celebrate our love of the ocean. And that is a realm that really is too big to fail. We won’t let it. We won’t let the ark sink on our watch. The ocean is: *too...big...to fail.* ○