

Future depends on long-term planning

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Barack Obama or Mitt Romney?

That's the question on the minds of American voters, political pundits and international observers - at least through November.

The four-year presidential election cycle shapes American politics - and the American policy agenda. Unfortunately, such short-term thinking limits our efforts at long-term planning, especially when preparing for decades - and even centuries - in the future means making tough choices today. Short-term thinking is hardwired into our nature, says New York City psychologist Nando Pelusi.

"For most of human history, we didn't have steady, ready resources for food or water or energy or safety," Pelusi explains, so our priorities were shaped by immediate needs. Because evolution responded to these demands, "we have a bias towards whatever is most viable in the foreseeable future, and it's very hard for us to think long-term."

But now, the fate of our species rests on our ability to escape our evolved short-term bias in time to face pernicious threats like climate change and exhaustion of natural resources - threats of our own making.

The idea of thinking beyond ourselves isn't new, as any parent or grandparent can tell you. And it's been assimilated deep into cultural norms before, says Wes Jackson, founder of the Land Institute, a nonprofit organization focused on agricultural sustainability. At a public discussion earlier this year, Jackson described the "seventh generation" philosophy espoused by the Iroquois Nations: "No decision was made without asking the question, 'What will this mean seven lives down the line?'"

In extreme environments, conservation and long-term planning were critical for survival. David Ehrenfeld, Rutgers University professor of ecology and author of the book "Becoming Good Ancestors," cites Arctic peoples like the Inuit, who must anticipate long winters and prepare for bad years. "The group itself really plans for disaster ahead, and that tends to increase stability within the group. I think a lot of our ancestors thought about things that were good for the group over the long term, even if it meant a degree of sacrificing."

Perhaps that's why we also find evidence of long-term planning whenever cohesive civilizations make their most lasting marks. "Go back to medieval times," says Paul Ehrlich, Stanford University professor of ecology. "People built cathedrals that would not be finished until their great-grandchildren were there."

Such long-term thinking has fallen out of fashion in America, where we've returned to our evolutionary norm of "Now, now, now." In part, our shortsightedness may stem from our country's colonial origins, says Bill Casey, a lecturer at the University of Queensland in Australia. "The idea was to make the colony self-sufficient as quickly as possible," usually by importing European ideas that didn't always fit the New World environment. This precipitated a pattern of "short-term, boom-bust thinking," says Casey, with devastating consequences for natural resources.

But long-term thinking is hardly un-American, argues Ehrenfeld. "Our forefathers did a lot of planning that was rather farsighted." And a century ago, we established the National Park Service and the Forest Service to protect our natural resources. "That wasn't done by people who were thinking short term!"

Since then, however, Ehrenfeld says that politics, greed, and "an abundance of cheap energy which has led people to think nothing bad can happen," have once again trapped us in short-term mind-sets.

"There's this modern 'cult of the new,'" confirms Ehrlich. "Success is being able to consume the newest thing in the biggest quantities. I think our society is nuts in that respect."

Today, many Americans agree with Ehrlich and are working as individuals and in groups to shift our prevailing outlook toward long-term thinking.

One such group is the San Francisco's Long Now Foundation, which hopes to reframe our temporal perceptions by making a simple change: Tagging a zero onto the front of the year. By writing 2012 as 02012, we place ourselves in what Stewart Brand, foundation co-founder and president, believes is the appropriate context - a 10,000-year clock.

The 10,000-year time scale wasn't chosen at random, Brand says. It refers to our past - "measuring from the coming of agriculture" -

while reframing our future. Brand argues that this long-term perspective reveals historical trends that "are actually pretty encouraging. And it's reasonable to project that encouragement forward and think that if things have been getting better for this long, they're likely to keep doing that."

Of course, life is still full of short-term problems, acknowledges Brand. "You're trying not to drive off the road, not to have an even more calamitous politician than the current one, trying not to go out of business." But as more people around the world escape poverty, they "have the time, and eventually the money, to invest in things that don't have anything to do with immediate survival and needs."

As a result, Brand says, "their sense of the 'now' expands in personal terms."

"It's this expanding norm that is very good news," says Brand, because we gain the ability to think about our future, and the future of other humans with whom we are increasingly connected through global commerce and media.

Pelusi agrees. Compared with our evolutionary ancestors, "we're more interconnected than ever; we're more dependent on others than ever." So the door is wide open for us to evolve forward in both our social skills, and our long-term thinking.

Indeed, Pelusi argues that every day we show our ability to confront unpleasant short-term experiences in our long-term interests. For example, "We go to the dentist even though we don't like sitting down and letting this guy drill our teeth! Only a crazy person would do that - except that we know it's good for us long term."

The next step is to extend this within-lifetime long-term thinking to multigenerational concepts. As scientific literacy brings us closer to a social - as well as scientific - consensus on climate change, for example, we may be more willing to accept short-term alterations to our lifestyles to accommodate the needs of humans, say, seven generations down the line.

Not everyone is optimistic, though. Just an hour's drive away from our nation's birthplace in Philadelphia, Ehrenfeld worries that we've lost too many critical skills - like growing our own food or basic home repair - by relying on energy-intensive technologies. Now, without those practical skills, "people all over the country are suddenly facing the threat of things getting worse," he explains. "This makes them angry, it makes them want to blame, and it promotes the epitome of short-term, knee-jerk thinking."

Ehrlich believes that our salvation - if it comes - will stem from cultural evolution. Together with other members of the Millennium Assessment of Human Behavior, Ehrlich is working to understand whether cultures can evolve fast enough to address environmental issues. Because "we're not stuck with generation time," cultural norms can shift faster than our genetic makeup. "After all," says Ehrlich, with a fond smile, "I've been able to learn from my grandchildren, even though I can't get any genes from them."

In the end, for all its short-term thinking faults, America remains a democracy, in which the opinion of the majority still carries the day. So when our social norms finally catch up to our long-term environmental needs, the president - Barack Obama, Mitt Romney or some other leader many years down the line - will have to answer.

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