

Hawaii as a starving donkey
(or, Thoughts while sitting on my ass)

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I must admit that I am pretty skeptical. I am the embodiment of years of failure, and I wonder what is different about this group, here, today.

But here I am, willing to give it yet one more try, if only because I know this is new for some of you, and that you are perhaps more serious about your future than were those who came before you about theirs.

Because of our remoteness, and the physical separation of each island, I have argued for years that Hawaii should be a world leader in telecommunications, in industry, education and government, but we STILL are arguing about it, acting as though it were a radical, dangerous idea, and failing to act seriously or definitively.

Because of our location and people, I have also argued for years that we clearly should be a current leader in biotechnology, but the Governor seems to be acting as though biotech were some new idea, the wave of the future, instead of the looming wave of the present.

I have also argued even more loudly that Hawaii should be a leader in the motion picture industry--really, of the image-making industry--leading in the creation and development of computer games and all other multimedia. But instead we were recently paralyzed by an argument over whether we should lie on our backs or on our faces in order better to be screwed by BabeWatch, one of the world's most successful television series which we have agreed to subsidize, of all things.

There is nothing to argue about here. We either do these things as leaders, or we become passive users at best. These are dominant technologies and lifestyles now, getting more and more important in the future.

They will also impact in many ways what we consider to be our only economic hope, tourism, which does have a future, in my opinion, but a future quite different and less central from what it was in the past for us, I believe.

I think the biggest difference is the growing understanding that "nature" is dead, or nearly so, and that carefully imagined and designed artificiality is rapidly replacing it.

For example, Jesse Ausubel, "The liberation of the environment" (in Jesse Ausubel and H. Dale Langford, Technological Trajectories and the Human Environment. Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1997), pp. 10ff) has written:

"[H]igh incomes, great longevity, and large population concentrations have been achieved in every class of population on Earth. We manufacture computers in hot, dry Phoenix and cool, wet Portland. We perform heart surgery in humid Houston and snowy Cleveland. Year round we grow flowers in the Netherlands and vegetables in Belgium. The metro in Budapest runs regardless of the mud that slowed Hungarians for a thousand years. In Berlin and Bangkok we work in climate-controlled office buildings. We have insulated travel, communications, energy generation, food availability, and almost all major social functions from all but the most extreme environmental conditions of temperature and wind, light and dark, moisture, tides, and seasons.

"The Japanese have even moved skiing and sand beaches indoors. In the world's largest indoor ski center, Ski-Dome near Tokyo, the slope extends 490 meters by 100 meters, with a thrilling drop of 80 meters that satisfies the standards of the International Ski Federation for parallel slalom competition. On the South Island of Kyushu, Ocean-Dome encloses 12,000 square meters of sandy beach and an ocean six times the size of an Olympic pool, filled with 13,500 tons of unsalted, chlorinated water kept at a warm 28 degrees C. A wave machine produces surf up to three-and-a-half meters high, enough for professional surfing. Palm trees and shipwrecks provide the context.

"In fact, careful records of human time budgets show that not only New Yorkers and Indians, but also Californians, reputed nature enthusiasts, average only about one-and-a half hours per day outside. Fewer than 5 percent of the population of industrial nations work outdoors. In developing countries, the number is plummeting and should be below 20 percent globally by 2050. As Lee Schipper shows, lifestyles revolve around the household. The achievement of ten thousand years of human history is that we have again become cave-dwellers--with electronic gadgets. ...

"We have liberated ourselves from the environment. Now it is time to liberate the environment itself."

Trajectories like that will have a profound impact of sun-based tourists destinations such as ours. How can, how should we adjust to that?

There are niches in all those areas, but we have to be willing to commit to them, and we are not. And I fear that nothing in the process you are undertaking will enable anyone to make a clear decision, much less a commitment.

We are the proverbial donkey starving between two bales of hay.

One Bale is that of global high tech capitalism

The other Bale is that of low tech Hawaiian localism.

Until we as a community decide which we want--OR find a way to combine both--then we will continue to starve and die.

Years ago, Bud Smyser wrote a report for the EWC on some alternative futures of Hawaii. One alternative future was that Hawaii would be a Backwater, a stagnant pond in a world rushing on by.

That was very undesirable to Smyser, and I think he simply wrote that scenario as a strawman, never thinking it would become reality.

But Hawaii IS now a backwater, and going backward at ever greater speed with each passing day.

Yesterday, the Sunday Advertiser published a wonderful piece by Peter Adler which I hope everyone read.

Peter urges Hawaii to make the most of being a backwater. While all the rest of the world homogenizes, Hawaii will remain the one weird place that is NOT like everywhere else--so people will flock to us, out of sheer relief.

I sent an email to Peter congratulating him on the first good new idea about Hawaii I have heard in years, and making sure I understood him correctly, and he replied to me:

"Jim:

You got it exactly right. I think globalization will make places like New York, Hong Kong, Singapore, and London major nodes on the world circuit board. Money and information will be the electricity running around the board. 25 years from now, though, people will really prize places that are "off the board" and that have retained some of their quirkiness, that trade in things above and beyond money and information. Not that those things are terrible. Just

insufficient."

So I think you ought to give VERY serious consideration to what Peter says. Strive to be the best little backwater on the planet.

Or else, tell me why this State has been unable to move beyond the teat of tourism for 30 years?

I have participated in meetings like this ever since I came to Hawaii in 1969 and we are still talking, and not doing. We are always the place that lets other people do it to us.

So, let's admit it. We are a backwater but we are going to be GOOD at it.

I doubt many of you saw my article in the Star Bulletin a few weeks ago about the past, present, and future of the University of Hawaii, but I made a similar argument: The people who, 40 years ago, imagined UH could be a world class university, and tried to make it so, never realized how fragile our tiny, isolated, and fragmented island community is.

So, I suggested, we should strive to be a bit better than the University of Guam, and model UH after universities in other small states, such as the University of North Dakota, or Montana, or Idaho, or Vermont. Those are all universities that serve their communities well, and don't pretend to be world class in much of anything.

In that article, in addition to suggesting that the tenure system be abolished, and all instructors be put on five year renewable contracts, I also urged much more reliance on community colleges combined with distance education, and that we end the pretense that UHM can be a major research institution which it cannot since neither the State nor the community can--or will--do its share to permit that.

I also said we should drop out of Division 1A athletics and return to the days when our high school games were the major events here, only this time it should be at the college level, with games between HPU, Chaminade, Hilo, Manoa, and all of the community colleges upgraded to small four year colleges..

I am dead serious about this.

Either we make a virtue out of our smallness, isolation, and fragility, or else we change our goals and educational system, and prepare ALL of our

citizens to be major and successful actors in the global capitalist game.

I understand that our kids do poorly on verbal skills, but well on math. So let's load them up with more and more math, science, and engineering, and enable our kids to be the world's best scientists and technicians in artificial intelligence, artificial life, quantum computing, biotechnology, nanotechnology, genetic engineering, and all aspects of space science. Those are areas of great potential strength and advantage for us. Let's build on them.

I have spent a lot of time recently doing futures consulting in Singapore--a nation which, 20 years ago, would not even let me off the airplane because my hair was too long. Well, Singapore, like Hawaii, is also a small island community with a splendid mix of several cultures. But a decision was made some time ago to make Singapore an Intelligent Island, and every expense and decision has been turned in that direction, so that Singapore now IS an Intelligent Island--a splendid, forward looking, adaptive, progressive community. Certainly it still does some things in ways I would prefer they not, but they are fully aware that the whole world is watching, and that if they want to play at the highest global level, then they need to have the most advanced government and judiciary, as well as the most advanced educational system, workforce, business regulations, and system of human rights.

They are committed to such change in order to retain global leadership.

But we are NOT doing any of those things either. We continue to improve neither our verbal nor our mathematical skills, while some people instead become immersed in Hawaiian language and the revitalization of lost aspects of Hawaiian culture.

So, what should we do?

First of all, WE should not do it. Instead, I believe we need to ask the CITIZENS OF THIS STATE that question, frankly, fairly, and honestly, and then begin a lengthy community-wide discussion of what any decision might mean.

In 1970, the State held the most extensive and thorough exercise in what Alvin Toffler called "Anticipatory Democracy" the world has ever seen. For a year and a half, all segments of the State, on all islands, spent considerable time contemplating Hawaii in the Year 2000.

Unfortunatly we are STILL looking at the Year 2000 as though that were the future.

It is high time the State, as a whole, and for a considerable period of time, contemplate, say, Hawaii in the Year 2050.

And then let's decide what kind of a future we want, one way or the other, and act so as to achieve it.

Or else, the donkey which is Hawaii deserves to continue to starve between the two nutritious bales of hay.