

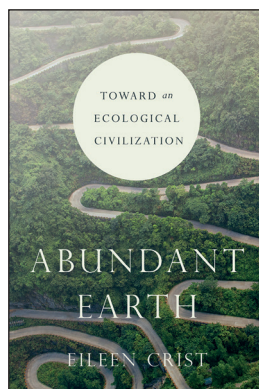
## How We Continue to Perpetuate the Attitude of Human Superiority in Environmental Science and Management—and What We Can Do about It

*Abundant Earth: Toward an Ecological Civilization.* Crist, Eileen. University of Chicago Press, 2019. 288 pp., illus., \$35.00. (ISBN: 9780226596808 paper).

Those of us who have dedicated our life's work to the various environmental sciences and management are united in our desire to help heal our planet and create a more sustainable and just future. We consider this work and these fields of study and employment to be something of a stalwart effort pushing against those forces in the world working to bring ruin to what we consider beautiful, valuable, and worth protecting. Perhaps no basic idea or attitude more readily and completely captures those opposing forces than that of human superiority.

In her book *Abundant Earth: Toward an Ecological Civilization*, scholar Eileen Crist not only shows us how influential the concept of human superiority is in our lives, but she also provides a road map to rethinking our place in the world. In a nutshell, this is the main argument of the book. The dominant Western worldview, built on the mistaken belief that humans are separate from and superior to nature, is fundamentally responsible for our current environmental problems. Many of the so-called solutions to our environmental crises do not challenge or rethink that dominant worldview. Unless we rethink that worldview, we will not adequately address our current environmental problems. In other words, at the most rudimentary level, our problems are philosophical and ethical, so our solutions must be philosophical and ethical as well.

Crist defines a *worldview* as “a cultural interpretive system that implies far more than a set of reigning ideas. It constitutes a lived belief system within which values, ideas, assumptions, and actions are intertwined. It spawns certain ways of thinking and being in the world while precluding others.” Change a worldview, and actions change in turn. Fail to change a worldview, and you will likewise fail to alter our current “monstrous and now global superstructure of domination.”



The belief in and embodiment of human superiority is the cornerstone of the currently dominant worldview that has created our environmental problems. As Crist puts it, we are enacting “a shared worldview that authorizes humanity to continue expanding its numbers, appetites, and technologies... champions and normalizes human expansionism.” We often focus our conservation efforts only on the *fallout* from basic assumptions about what the world is, what we humans are, and what ought to be the relationship between them. But, as

Crist points out, “there exists a deeper causal layer: a human-supremacist worldview that sustains the conventionality of the direct hits and gives permission to the ultimate drivers to continue expanding.”

In her book, Crist provides a good amount of critique of the standard fare of environmental destruction: climate change, biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse. Industrial agriculture and the fossil fuel economy receive detailed critical treatment. But this book is only superficially about those manifestations of our flawed and dangerous worldview, it is also about solutions and rethinking. Part of that rethinking involves exercising caution as we entertain different kinds of solutions.

Crist warns us of being tricked into reinforcing our current worldview even as we are offered and entertain alternative solutions. For example, by employing deceptively vague euphemisms, we often continue to perpetuate—and thereby empower—the exact forces we believe we oppose. In Crist’s words, “the identical notion [of human superiority] has been upheld in the idea of natural resources—and its many spinoffs like fisheries, lumber, game, livestock, and freshwater, as well as ecosystem services, working forests, and natural capital—which conceptually codify [St. Thomas Aquinas’ belief about] ‘subjecting all things to man’s power’ and perpetuate humanity’s assumed prerogative to the nonhuman realm.” In euphemistically masking and therefore propagating the status quo, we stunt our imaginations, we hand out a stone when, in fact, the world needs bread, and we continue

to unwittingly empower and engage in apologetics for those powers in the world we believe we oppose and that so often despise us.

This is a hard pill to swallow, and we suspect that readers who buy in to the virtuosity of the various environmental sciences and management will struggle mightily here, perhaps rejecting the argument outright because of the discomfort of its implications. The discomfort that comes with the cognitive dissonance that Crist drops on us is understandable, but we urge readers to sit with it for a spell, consider it, try to understand why Crist would say this, and perhaps try to understand even whether her argument might have some amount of merit.

Some readers may find the book repetitive at times. Readers of this journal may see a lack of nuance in topics like biodiversity. Other readers may be impatient with some of the book's main arguments by Crist's complex breakdowns of philosophical theories on human superiority. But the critical message of the book is important and powerfully stated.

According to Crist, the overall goal of our work needs to be "shrinking the human presence." Crist reviews many ways—both conceptual and practical—to attend to this work. Perhaps her most poignant discussion is on human population control, a topic so fraught that we currently seem unable and unwilling to engage it; instead, we have essentially silenced all

reasonable conversation on the topic. For us, this is one of the best bits of the book. In this section, Crist calls out the various "rhetorical deceits" used to stifle productive conversations on imposing limits on ourselves. She argues that, once again, our inability to have this conversation is further evidence of our belief in human superiority and the unlimited expansionism that follows. "A new imagination is needed about who we are and who we can become," she writes. And with this new imagination will come the ability to welcome limitations. She then offers an entirely new way to "refram[e] the population question."

Crist's argument would have profound implications for our institutions. Natural resources education, for example, is not only incomplete without a serious exploration and understanding of the history of ideas and concepts that underpin our practices (i.e., without philosophy and ethics), but it is preserving a delusion wherein we believe we are training students to be forces of good and sustainability in the world, when we might in fact be doing just the opposite. Such training might also be stunting the imagination, limiting our choices, and short selling our young and our future.

The book ends with a powerful and poignant message. As Crist writes, "Civilization, as we know it, rests squarely on the domination of nature... Domination is not a contingent aspect, a correctable defect, or an

unfortunate side effect of civilization, but constitutional to its very character." But we choose these beliefs, and we can (and better) choose others. As Christ puts it, "Civilization does not need to be saved, but reinvented." We could choose, for example, belonging. "Who we are," Christ writes, "is children of a living world. This universal knowing and its tropes of participation, reciprocity, gratitude, belonging, and love reside deeply within us. We can choose to cultivate and grow them into a beautiful human way of life."

We are called to a great exercise of the human imagination, perhaps in the history of the world. We are called to dream a different world into existence. This is our work. In Eileen Crist's own words, "it is the most heroic task human beings have ever been called to—and a task we are capable of rising to, for there are so many reasons to wager that under the accreted armor of human superiority lies an ocean of tenderness and love for the living world."

MICHAEL PAUL NELSON AND  
THEA ROSE LEMBERGER  
*Michael Paul Nelson and Thea Rose Lemberger are affiliated with Oregon State University, in Corvallis, Oregon, in the United States.*

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