



Kansas State University Libraries
New Prairie Press

Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal

2024 - Stewards of the Land (Sandy Carlson,
editor)

Citizens

Philip Heying

Follow this and additional works at: <https://newprairiepress.org/sfh>

Recommended Citation

Heying, Philip (2024). "Citizens," Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal.

To order hard copies of the Field Journals, go to shop.symphonyintheflinthills.org.

The Field Journals are made possible in part with funding from the Fred C. and Mary R. Koch Foundation.

This Event is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Symphony in the Flint Hills Field Journal by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.



Two Does Gazing Near the Headwaters of the South Fork
Cottonwood River — 2 January, 2023 8:04 pm
Philip Heying

CITIZENS

What will the world look like in 50 or 100 years?

It is all too easy to imagine it as a dystopian wasteland. On the other hand, cognitive science and common sense tell us that people tend to assume that what works today, business as usual, will always work. Yet it is certain that business as usual is no longer an option. This era has come to be called the Anthropocene, because humanity is now the predominant force of change on the planet, drastically transforming the earth's atmosphere, climate and geology with shocking rapidity. If we are to avoid catastrophe of unprecedented scale and destruction, humanity must imagine some alternative, hold a vision of the future that is desirable and make the changes necessary to fulfill that image.

It could not be clearer that there needs to be a massive shift in societal values, putting stewardship ahead of short-term profit. Humanity is critically stressing planetary boundaries in ways that pose extreme risks. We need new stories about our place in the world and how we act in it, and those stories need to shift our values to be inclusive of all the vital systems and forms we currently only consider as “externalities” as a basis for reimagining our interactions with the world and each other.

My training and experience as a commercial photographer have led me to consider promotion as a central function of any given picture. What is being promoted by an image may be obvious, like a particular kind of shoe, or more abstract, like a conceptual artistic framework. It may be a straightforward visual description, like an actor's headshot, or an evocation of emotional attachment, like a wedding photograph. Whatever the view, it relates to advertising. Such a view is not always

appropriate or useful. But thinking of economic promotion can help in understanding the context of and motivation behind an image or group of images.

Such an interpretation begins with a broader understanding of what could constitute cost and what might be a profit. These don't have to be analyzed in monetary value. The cost might be an idea that can only work once. The profit might be a sense of communion, and there will always be externalities.

The term "externality" is defined, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, as "a side effect or consequence of an industrial or commercial activity that affects other parties without this being reflected in the cost of the goods or services involved." There are positive and negative externalities. An example of a positive externality is that when honey is produced, the bees also pollinate nearby crops. Carbon dioxide is a negative externality of fossil fuel energy. The real cost of externalities is hard to calculate.

It seems to me that externalities pop up in photography all the time. A photographer making pictures of microscopic chemical reactions might invent a formal vocabulary that applies to pictures of musical performances. Pictures of great landscapes might help us understand the disaster of war. Portraits

of celebrities might lead us to elect fools to political office. It could happen.

So I think often about externalities, which have become central to my photography.

I live in a place that is rich with externalities. This environment is heavily shaped by human design. Yet it has been shaped so that non-human life isn't excluded by monoculture farming or the presence of cities. That is to say, the externalities have generally, though not entirely, been left to propagate much as they would without human presence.

In this age that is now called the Anthropocene, this Flint Hills tallgrass prairie offers evidence for imagining a way of living in the world where negative externalities aren't dominant and destructive. Humans and animals often exist beside each other in parallel communities. Alongside the public commonwealth, there is another, incalculable, commonwealth of life. It can't and shouldn't be described on ledger sheets. It is an affirmation of what it is to be attentive to the pure, myriad sensations of vitality.

Until recently, the idea that the weather might somehow be under human control could be considered a subject for science fiction. Now, 60 years on, it's a matter of serious scientific consideration. Geoengineering is a real possibility. Much research is being done



Heron Rousing After Bathing in Thurman Creek on the Rowe Farm Southeast of Matfield Green — 28 March, 2023 8:44 pm
Philip Heying

to find technological solutions to the dire environmental emergency that is currently unfolding. Who will pay for such interventions and how they will be paid for are matters of debate. How much we will or won't or can't pay to preserve life on this planet is a very real question.

The deer cannot hire a public relations firm to promote its interests. The coyotes that fill the night air with their chorus aren't getting any airtime on the radio. The birds that fly through as they migrate

aren't dropping leaflets. The fish won't be sending any mailers. The raccoons don't have a website. The hummingbirds are not being endorsed by star athletes. The bluestem grasses can't discount their subscription fees. The hills aren't offering free samples.

What they do offer is perhaps the most impossible thing to quantify. They radiate vital beauty. It costs me nothing to witness this. Yet I feel enormously fulfilled by it. They are all together

dazzling, challenging, mysterious, never repetitious, bewildering, and possessive of a kind of genius. Even if we do drastically change this place through our neglect and excess, it will, once we relent, regenerate with a force that is the origin of all religious metaphor.

I think the animals I encounter are representatives of the knowledge required to live as a vital part of the world without depleting it, knowledge that is lost to me. Having lived around animals of various degrees of domestication for most of my life, I am convinced that we have much in common; they possess emotions, intelligence and sensitivity, forming a parallel society of “citizens” that rarely intersects with our own. Fleeting instances of pure mutual curiosity leave me questioning the very foundation of my existence and the choices I make. What, really, lies on the end of the fork I hold in my hand?

Images that unsentimentally demonstrate the intelligence, sensitivity and emotional complexity of animals

Philip Heying developed a passion for photography during middle school. After earning a bachelor's in fine arts in painting in 1983, he committed to photography. He became friends with William Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and Timothy Leary during his college years. In 2022, Philip received a Guggenheim Fellowship, photographing the tallgrass ecosystem. His current project, “A Survey of Elemental Gratitude,” explores grassland ecology's resilience and diversity. He now resides in Matfield Green, Kansas.

might be used to promote a shift toward a more sustainable and ethical future.

Western society is deeply rooted in the mythology of human dominion over nature. This belief system has led to persistent social injustices and widespread environmental exploitation and degradation, pushing the planet to the brink of ecological collapse. To overcome these challenges, we need a new story, one that recognizes the intrinsic value and interdependence of all living beings and promotes a sense of stewardship rather than dominion.

Art has a powerful capacity to shape our understanding of the world. By expanding the canon of art to include the essential vital sentience of non-human animals, it might be possible to cultivate a deeper empathy and respect for the natural world and a deeper experience of our common humanity. This concept can serve as a ground for artworks that evoke and celebrate the mythopoeia, intelligence and sentient agency of wild animals.



Cindy Holds a Young Horned Lizard With a
Sweat Bee — 3 September, 2021 1:05 pm
Philip Heying