



A
HUMAN FLOURISHING
SEVEN PILLARS
ESSAY

Flourishing Earth

The World We Belong To

Scott McIntosh
Angela McIllece

CO-FOUNDERS
HUMAN FLOURISHING

humanflourishing.us

There is a moment that can happen when we see the Earth from far enough away. The familiar disappears, and with it the borders, the roads, and every visible argument about whose piece belongs to whom. What remains is land and water, weather moving across a thin atmosphere, and one small world carrying every person we have ever loved.

Four people saw it that way in April 2026. The crew of Artemis II flew around the far side of the moon and came home nine days later, the first human beings to see Earth from that distance since 1972. Somewhere along the way, they turned a camera around.

The rest of us get the photographs. Look at one long enough and you may catch yourself trying to find where you live. There is no chance of seeing it. You know that. You look anyway.

Then the scale changes again. The place you were trying to find disappears into the whole, and somehow the whole begins to feel personal. You want to protect it.

People who disagree about almost everything can share that response. The disagreement begins when we ask what protecting it requires.

For generations, much of the public argument about humanity and the Earth has been framed as a contest. Human prosperity presses against ecological limits, more people require more resources, and more development leaves less room for the rest of the living world. Within that frame, protecting one side eventually requires sacrifice from the other.

We think the relationship is more interesting than that. Human flourishing and the flourishing of the Earth belong to the same story.

The living world makes human life possible in the most literal sense, and it also gives us experiences that make life larger than survival: beauty, wonder, memory, the sense of being at home somewhere, and the sudden perspective that arrives when we stand in front of something much larger than ourselves. Human beings shape that world in return. Our ability to foresee consequences, cooperate across distance, invent, destroy, and repair has grown enormously, and many living systems now have futures that depend in part on what we decide to do.

That relationship runs both ways. It begins with belonging.

The Place Where Human Life Happens

Every account of human flourishing begins somewhere. A person needs food. A body needs clean water and breathable air. A family needs a place where children can grow. Communities depend on soil, energy, weather, materials, and living systems that existed long before anyone built a house, drew a boundary, or opened a business. These facts are so basic that they disappear beneath everything we build on top of them.

Our relationship with the living world goes deeper than dependence.

A child can spend twenty minutes following a beetle across a sidewalk. Adults stop talking when the sky suddenly fills with color. People travel great distances to stand beside an ocean or beneath old trees. We plant gardens we do not need for calories, put windows where we can see mountains, and remember the smell of rain in places we once called home. The language of resources cannot fully describe what is happening there.

The natural world matters because human life depends on it. It also matters because human beings encounter beauty, awe, memory, and belonging through it.

A river can be measured by flow, water quality, species counts, and economic use, and each of those measures tells us something important. A river can also become part of the identity of a place. Children swim there, families return to the same bank for decades, someone knows where the cottonwoods bend toward the water, and someone else remembers what the river looked like before a road crossed it. When that river becomes unusable, the loss reaches well beyond water quality.

The same is true of a night sky that disappears behind artificial light, a species that vanishes, or a familiar landscape changed past recognition. These are ecological losses, and they are human losses too.

E.O. Wilson used the word biophilia for the human affinity with other living things. He offered it as a hypothesis, and the scientific questions around it remain open. The larger human observation is harder to miss: across cultures and across history, people have organized meaning around seasons, animals, rivers, mountains, weather, harvests, and stars. Even when our buildings and technologies make nature easy to ignore, we have never lived outside it.

A flourishing human life includes some relationship with the world that made human life possible. We belong here.

Belonging carries a different moral weight from ownership. A thing we own can be valued primarily for what it does for us. A place to which we belong becomes part of the story of who we are, and that difference changes the question. If the Earth is mainly an inventory of useful material, stewardship becomes an exercise in management. If human beings are mainly an ecological burden, care for the planet drifts toward the idea that the best human presence is a smaller one.

Belonging opens another possibility. We can value our own presence here and still understand that we are part of a living world we did not create. We can want more human beings to live good lives and care deeply about the places and systems that make those lives possible.

Confidence in human worth and humility before the living world can coexist. They need each other.

What Security Makes Possible

Care has a horizon, and precariousness contracts it. A parent wondering whether there will be enough food next week does not have the same freedom to think about what a watershed will look like in thirty years. Someone whose livelihood depends today on cutting a tree faces a different calculation from someone deciding whether that tree should still be standing in a generation. This is part of what scarcity does. It narrows attention toward what must be solved now, and what it takes first is the long view.

Security widens the horizon again. Education creates choices that did not exist before, health and material stability free attention for questions beyond immediate survival, and people can think further into the future when the present no longer requires everything they have.

Ronald Inglehart and the World Values Survey have tracked a related pattern since 1981, across nearly a hundred countries holding close to ninety percent of the world's population and spanning very different religions, histories, and political systems. As material security rises, populations tend to move away from survival-focused values and place greater emphasis on participation, quality of life, self-expression, and concerns extending beyond immediate material need.

That pattern matters here because environmental care almost always asks people to think past the immediate. A clean river tomorrow can require expense today. Restoring a damaged landscape can take decades. Protecting a species asks us to care about something whose survival may never change our own material circumstances at all.

The Thames is one example of what becomes possible. Parts of the river were declared biologically dead in 1957. Decades of investment, regulation, infrastructure, and sustained public attention changed that, and the tidal river now supports 115 species of fish and 92 species of bird. The recovery is real and it is not finished. The number of fish species in the tidal stretch has slipped slightly since the early 1990s, and researchers have not established why.

London's air tells the harder half of the same story. The Great Smog of December 1952 killed roughly four thousand people in five days, and perhaps three times that number in

the months that followed. For the first days of it, ministers attributed the deaths to an influenza outbreak that the data did not show. The City of London banned smoke in the Square Mile two years later, and the Clean Air Act passed in 1956. Four years from catastrophe to law, and the first stretch of it was denial.

Neither river nor air recovered because wealth reliably produces good outcomes. They recovered because people living in societies with scientific knowledge, functioning institutions, technical capability, and the resources to act eventually decided the condition of the water and the air was unacceptable.

Those capacities are worth naming precisely. A capable society can redesign an industrial process, restore damaged habitat, build cleaner forms of energy, and fund research whose benefits arrive long after the people paying for it are gone.

Human flourishing gives us more choices. It does not choose for us.

Capacity Is Not Character

The relationship between prosperity and the Earth becomes less comfortable the closer we look at the record. Wealth and technological capability have helped societies solve serious environmental problems, and they have allowed environmental harm at extraordinary scale. Both belong in the story.

The recovery of the ozone layer shows what human capacity can accomplish when it is joined to a decision. In the 1970s, atmospheric scientists found that chemicals widely used in refrigeration and other industries were destroying stratospheric ozone. The problem was global and largely invisible in ordinary life, and no household could solve it by making better choices at the store.

Countries acted together anyway. The Montreal Protocol was signed in 1987, every country in the world ultimately joined it, and more than 99 percent of the production and consumption of controlled ozone-depleting substances has since been phased out. If current policies hold, the ozone layer is projected to return to 1980 levels around 2040 across most of the world, around 2045 over the Arctic, and around 2066 over the Antarctic. A planetary problem was identified by science, addressed through international cooperation, and placed on a path toward recovery within a human lifetime.

That outcome required wealth, institutions, technology, and knowledge. It also required a choice.

Other problems remind us that capacity alone settles nothing. Carbon emissions have risen with prosperity, and wealthy societies remain among the highest emitters per person. Some have reduced emissions while continuing to grow, though the gains are uneven, and part of the apparent improvement in certain countries reflects manufacturing that moved somewhere else.

The exceptions to that pattern argue for this pillar rather than against it. France, Sweden, and Switzerland are wealthy and comparatively low emitters, largely because of decisions about nuclear and hydroelectric power taken decades ago. France built out its nuclear fleet in the 1970s and has run well below its peers ever since. Capacity joined to a decision, again, in a different century and a different domain.

Forests reveal a more complicated picture than either side of this argument usually admits.

Permanent agricultural expansion is the leading driver of forest loss worldwide, accounting for roughly a third of it, and across the tropics it leads everywhere. Some of that is subsistence clearing by people with few alternatives. A great deal of it is beef, soy, palm oil, and cocoa moving toward consumers who will never see the land that was cleared. Prosperity sits on both sides of that transaction.

The trend is also moving in the right direction. The Food and Agriculture Organization reported in 2025 that deforestation has slowed in every region of the world over the past decade, that primary forest is being lost at roughly half the rate of the early 2000s, and that forests still cover about a third of the planet's land area. Net forest area continues to decline, and it declines more slowly with each decade that passes.

Something else is happening at the same time, and it is usually left out. The Earth is getting greener. Satellite measurements of leaf area show a persistent increase across a quarter to a half of the world's vegetated land since the early 1980s, with less than four percent showing the opposite. Part of that is carbon dioxide doing what carbon dioxide does, since plants are built out of it. Much of it is deliberate. China and India together account for nearly a third of the global increase in green leaf area while holding nine percent of the vegetated land, through tree planting and more intensive cultivation. People decided to do that, and the satellites can see it.

None of which makes carbon simple, and the complexity runs in both directions.

Carbon is not a contaminant. It is the element life is assembled from, the thing every green plant pulls out of the air to make itself, and the origin of the oxygen we breathe. The problem was never the substance. It is the quantity and the speed, and what a fast change in both does to systems that formed under different conditions. The greening has its own limits as well. The trend has slowed since the late 1990s, as rising atmospheric water demand offsets the fertilizing effect, and a planet with more leaf area is not the same as a planet with a stable climate or an intact web of species.

An argument that cannot hold two true things at once is not worth making. The Earth is greener than it was forty years ago, forests are being cleared more slowly than they were, and the carbon load remains a problem we have not solved.

The same pattern shows up in different forms. Wealth gives a society the ability to protect a forest and the purchasing power to finance the clearing of one somewhere else. Tech-

nology can reduce the material needed to make something and can make extraction faster. Markets respond well when scarcity appears in a price and much less reliably when the cost falls on people far away, on the atmosphere, or on generations who cannot enter the transaction.

A species is not a metal. A higher price cannot call an extinct species back into existence. The atmosphere does not send an invoice.

This is where an easy version of the abundance argument fails, and where this pillar makes its central claim instead.

Flourishing increases our capacity for stewardship. It does not guarantee that we will exercise it.

If prosperity automatically produced a healthy planet, there would be little for a pillar like this to ask of us. We could become wealthier and trust the outcome. The evidence does not permit that confidence.

Our ability to alter the living world has grown faster than our ability to see all the consequences. Decisions made in one place change forests, oceans, and atmospheric systems far away, and supply chains separate the person benefiting from a product from the land or water affected by producing it.

The same expansion of human power gives us more ways to respond. We can understand consequences that unfold over decades, decide that something should survive even when destroying it would be profitable, repair damage done before we were born, and invent alternatives to practices that once seemed unavoidable.

The ozone layer shows what happens when capacity becomes action. Carbon shows what happens while the decision remains unfinished.

Human beings are neither automatically good for the planet nor condemned to damage it. Our influence has become too large for either story to be useful. The question is what kind of people we choose to become now that our reach is this large.

What Human Beings Add

Every other species on Earth is bounded by what its environment happens to provide. A population rises until it exhausts something, and then it falls. That is the arithmetic of carrying capacity, and it holds across the living world with one exception.

Human beings change what counts as a resource.

A resource is never only a physical thing. It is a physical thing joined to the knowledge of what to do with it. Petroleum was a nuisance that ruined farmland before anyone learned

to refine it. Uranium was an unremarkable rock. Sand was sand until we learned to draw it into fiber and send light through it, and a strand of glass now carries what once required a heavy bundle of copper.

The clearest case is nitrogen. Every crop needs it, plants cannot take it from the air, and for most of agricultural history the supply came from manure, crop rotation, and eventually from guano and Chilean deposits that were being consumed faster than they could be replaced. This was a hard ceiling on how many people could be fed, and educated people at the turn of the twentieth century said so. Then Fritz Haber filed a patent in 1908 for the synthesis of ammonia from its elements, Carl Bosch built it to industrial scale, and nitrogen became something we pull out of the air. Researchers estimate that roughly half the people alive today are fed by nitrogen fixed through that process.

The ceiling was real. Knowledge moved it.

The same example carries the qualification this essay keeps insisting on. Most of the nitrogen we now fix escapes into rivers, groundwater, and the atmosphere, where it feeds algal blooms and degrades habitat. Haber and Bosch solved the problem in front of them and handed us a different one. That is the ordinary shape of technological progress, and it is why capacity has to be joined to attention rather than trusted on its own.

Some analysts push this line of reasoning much further. Tomas Pueyo has argued that a world using energy, land, and materials as well as we already know how to could support something in the range of a hundred billion people. The exercise is worth reading, and we do not rest anything on it. The number of people the Earth could theoretically hold is a question we will never have to answer.

Where the Numbers Are Going

Human population is not headed toward a hundred billion, or toward anything close to it.

Where child mortality falls, where women gain education and economic independence, and where old age stops depending on having many children, families choose to have fewer of them. The pattern appears across regions, religions, and political systems. It has never required instruction, and in the one large case where restriction was imposed, the decline was already underway.

The United Nations puts the global fertility rate at 2.25 births per woman, down from 3.31 in 1990. More than half of all countries are already below the replacement rate of 2.1. Sixty-three countries, containing 28 percent of the world's population, have already reached their peak. World population is projected to peak at about 10.3 billion in the mid-2080s

and then begin a gradual decline. A growing number of countries are now more worried about having too few young people than too many.

Hans Rosling spent much of his career explaining why this happens. His phrase peak child described a turning point the world has already passed. The number of children on Earth is no longer rising, and total population continues to grow for a time only because large generations are living longer.

Population stabilization is arriving through the conditions we associate with flourishing: security, health, education, and the freedom to decide.

Put the two ideas together and the stand follows.

Human flourishing eliminates poverty. The elimination of poverty is what brings the population curve to its peak. The world we are actually headed toward holds roughly ten billion people, and the question of whether the Earth can support ten billion is answered. It can. Human beings have repeatedly turned apparent ceilings into engineering problems, and ten billion sits well inside what our existing knowledge can feed, house, and power.

The open question is how those ten billion live. That is a question about method rather than about number, and it is the question this pillar exists to take seriously.

What Love Requires

Belonging becomes real through attention. A person who knows when a particular bird returns each spring notices the year it does not. Someone who has watched the same desert bloom after rain experiences that place differently from someone passing through at seventy miles an hour. A child who spends an hour turning over rocks in a creek has formed a relationship with something no lecture could manufacture. Attention turns nature from a category into a place we know, and care grows differently from there.

Sometimes care asks us to respect a limit. A fishery can be harvested beyond the point at which it recovers, an aquifer can be pumped faster than it refills, and a species can fall below the population it needs to survive. Respecting those limits is part of living intelligently inside a world of living systems.

Care can also take the form of restoration. Human beings have cleaned polluted rivers, restored habitat, removed poisons from air and water, and brought damaged places back toward health. Damage is evidence of what human power can do. So is repair.

Increasingly, care will require invention. Billions of people still want the things people everywhere have wanted when given the choice: reliable energy, safe homes, good food, mobility, comfort, and opportunity for their children.

A flourishing Earth cannot depend on telling people who have very little that prosperity was acceptable

for those who arrived first and irresponsible for everyone who comes after.

That is a moral challenge and a design challenge at once, and it means finding forms of abundance that make good lives more available while reducing what those lives cost the living systems around them. Human beings are very good at solving problems once we decide they are ours to solve.

There is one more part of care, and it is the part most easily overlooked. A culture of stewardship built entirely on fear will eventually exhaust the people asked to sustain it, and we have more durable reasons than fear. The world is beautiful. We love particular places. We want children and grandchildren to encounter things we encountered. We know the feeling of standing beneath a night sky and remembering that the universe is larger than whatever occupied our mind an hour earlier.

People protect what they have first learned to value. Gratitude can do work that guilt cannot.

One Commitment, Many Choices

A healthy relationship with the Earth will look different in different places. Some landscapes flourish when human pressure is reduced, and others now need active restoration because human activity altered them first. Some problems respond well to markets and better incentives, and others require law, public investment, scientific cooperation, philanthropy, or a community deciding that a place matters enough to protect.

There will be arguments about the right mechanism, and there should be. A pillar does not need to become a policy platform in order to matter. Its job is to say what we are trying to serve while people of good faith disagree about how.

Our starting commitments are simple enough to state. Human beings have worth. The living world has value beyond its immediate usefulness to us. Our flourishing is connected.

Those commitments still leave hard questions. How much land should remain undeveloped? Which energy tradeoffs are acceptable? What happens when environmental protection raises costs for people with very little? How should present human needs be weighed against consequences arriving decades from now? Which responsibilities belong to individuals, to companies, to communities, to governments?

People who accept this pillar completely will answer those differently. The disagreement does not weaken the pillar. It makes the pillar useful.

We want a world full of human beings living meaningful, healthy, connected, productive lives. We also want oceans with life in them, forests that endure, clean air and water, and places where wild things continue to exist for reasons beyond their economic usefulness. We see no contradiction in wanting both. The work is learning how to build both.

The Eighth Pillar

The first seven pillars of Human Flourishing name dimensions of life that matter in themselves. Flourishing Earth does too, and it begins with a recognition simple enough to overlook: every human life is lived here. Our bodies depend on living systems. Our economies draw from them. Our communities occupy actual landscapes. Our sense of beauty, home, wonder, and perspective is shaped by a world we did not make.

For most of human history, nature was vastly more powerful than we were. Storms arrived, rivers flooded, crops failed, disease spread, and human beings adapted to forces far beyond their control. Those forces remain.

What has changed is that human beings have become a planetary force too. We move species across continents. We change rivers and coastlines. We alter forests thousands of miles away through what we buy. We can detect changes in the atmosphere that no human eye can see, and organize a global response to reverse them.

That gives this generation a responsibility earlier generations carried differently. We know enough to understand many of the consequences of our choices, we have enough ingenuity to change many of them, we have evidence that repair is often possible, and we have enough experience to know that some losses are permanent.

Flourishing Earth is our commitment to bring those capacities into a more mature relationship with the living world.

We want human beings to flourish without apology for being here. We want our presence here to become increasingly worthy of the world we inherited. Those aspirations belong together.

A flourishing Earth is a world in which human life becomes more abundant while the living systems around us stay healthy, diverse, resilient, and capable of sustaining lives beyond our own. It is a world where prosperity gives us greater capacity to care and where we choose to use it, where ingenuity helps us do more than overcome scarcity and goes to work repairing damage, reducing waste, and restoring what can be restored. It is also a world where a child can still encounter something alive and unfamiliar, crouch down, and become fascinated for no useful reason at all.

We have much more to learn about what belonging asks of us, and one question is especially difficult. How much restraint should be asked of people who already have enough, particularly when the cost of that restraint may fall on people who do not?

History gives us reasons for care in both directions. Conservation imposed by the comfortable has often become another burden carried by the poor. Abundance without restraint pushes its costs onto people and places that receive few of its benefits. We do not have a formula that resolves that tension. We expect people who share this pillar to disagree about where the line should fall, and we would rather have that disagreement openly than hide it beneath a statement broad enough to mean nothing.

The stand underneath it is settled. Human beings belong on this Earth, and the Earth belongs within any serious account of human flourishing. Our future depends increasingly on whether we learn to flourish together.

Read the Human Flourishing Pledge at humanflourishing.us, and sign it if what it names is what you are trying to practice.

Share this essay with someone who sees the world differently than you do — and then, when they have read it, have the conversation about it.

The work is ongoing. The community is forming. The conversation is just beginning.

Scott McIntosh

Co-Founder, Human Flourishing | MAC6 | Conscious Capitalism Arizona

Scott McIntosh is an engineer-turned-entrepreneur who built McIntosh Engineering to \$50 million in revenue before co-founding MAC⁶, a thriving entrepreneurial community in Tempe, Arizona. He co-founded Conscious Capitalism Arizona as the third chapter globally and has been among the earliest investors and advocates for Heroic Public Benefit Corporation. A certified Positive Intelligence coach, longtime student of Stoic philosophy and ancient wisdom, and grandfather of four, Scott writes and speaks at the intersection of human flourishing, free enterprise, and the urgent questions that define our moment.

Angela McIllece

Co-Founder, Human Flourishing | Founder, Soul Force Strategies

Angela McIllece is a creative strategist, coach, and designer, and the founder of Soul Force Strategies. Drawing on her background in creative design, personal development philosophy, and community building, Angela works at the intersection of vision and execution — helping individuals and organizations clarify their identity and build with intention. As a military spouse for thirty years, Angela has lived and worked across cultures — including living in New Delhi, India and Bogotá, Colombia — raising young children abroad and traveling widely throughout Asia and Latin America, and across the United States. These experiences have shaped her deeply held belief that human flourishing is both universal and beautifully particular — expressed differently across cultures, but rooted in the same enduring human needs.

Selected Sources and Further Reading

Edward O. Wilson, *Biophilia* (Harvard University Press, 1984). Wilson's originating statement of the hypothesis that human beings possess an innate affinity for other living things.

Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). On sympathy as a feature of human nature and the social capacities underlying human cooperation.

Ronald Inglehart and the World Values Survey (worldvaluessurvey.org). Surveys conducted since 1981 across nearly a hundred countries holding close to ninety percent of the world's population, tracking value change as material security rises.

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, *World Population Prospects 2024: Summary of Results* (2024). Source for the population and fertility figures used in this essay.

Hans Rosling with Ola Rosling and Anna Rosling Rönnlund, *Factfulness* (Flatiron Books, 2018). On the demographic transition, population stabilization, and peak child.

Jan Willem Erisman, Mark A. Sutton, James Galloway, Zbigniew Klimont, and Wilfried Winiwarter, "How a Century of Ammonia Synthesis Changed the World," *Nature Geoscience* 1, no. 10 (2008): 636–639. Source for the share of the world's population fed by synthetic nitrogen and for the environmental costs of the nitrogen released in the process.

Tomas Pueyo, "100 Billion Humans," *Uncharted Territories* (2024). An extended argument that the Earth's theoretical carrying capacity is far higher than usually assumed. Presented here as an interesting exercise rather than a claim this argument depends on.

United Nations Environment Programme, Ozone Secretariat, *The Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer* (1987).

World Meteorological Organization and United Nations Environment Programme, *Scientific Assessment of Ozone Depletion: 2022*. Source for the phase-out figure and the projected recovery dates. The next quadrennial assessment is due at the end of 2026.

Michelle J. Sims et al., "Global Drivers of Forest Loss at 1 km Resolution," *Environmental Research Letters* 20, no. 7 (2025): 074027. The current global attribution of forest loss by driver.

Philip G. Curtis et al., "Classifying Drivers of Global Forest Loss," *Science* 361, no. 6407 (2018): 1108–1111. The earlier attribution study, which established commodity-driven clearing as a distinct category.

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *Global Forest Resources Assessment 2025* (FAO, 2025). Source for the slowing of deforestation across all regions and for current global forest cover.

Zaichun Zhu et al., "Greening of the Earth and Its Drivers," *Nature Climate Change* 6 (2016): 791–795. Satellite leaf-area records showing persistent greening across a quarter to a half of the world's vegetated land, with carbon dioxide fertilization accounting for about 70 percent of the trend.

Chi Chen et al., "China and India Lead in Greening of the World Through Land-Use Management," *Nature Sustainability* 2 (2019). Source for the finding that two countries holding nine percent of the world's vegetated land account for nearly a third of its new leaf area.

Wenping Yuan et al., "Increased Atmospheric Vapor Pressure Deficit Reduces Global Vegetation Growth," *Science Advances* 5 (2019): eaax1396. On the stalling of the greening trend since the late 1990s as atmospheric water demand rises.

Zoological Society of London, *The State of the Thames* (ZSL, 2021). The first full health assessment of the river since parts of it were declared biologically dead in 1957.