International Oaks

The Journal of the International Oak Society

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Q. utilis in Vietnam, Ontario's eleven,
oak adventures in China and in Bhutan…

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FOREWORD

The Difference We Make

Recently my attention was caught by this headline in a modest, regional newspaper *(The Oregonian*, Portland, January 16, 2015): "Earth changes likely dire, say researchers." The article, picked up from the *Washington Post*, went on to cite the journal *Science* that published in their January 15 edition a report by the Stockholm Resilience Centre. Four of nine "planetary boundaries" have been crossed, said the report, those being extinction rate, deforestation, level of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, and flow of nitrogen and phosphorous into the ocean. Led by Will Steffen of the Australian National University and the Resilience Centre, 18 researchers had collaborated in preparation of the paper.

According to the Stockholm Resilience Centre website, the concept of planetary boundaries was introduced in 2009 as a means of identifying levels of particular human-induced Earth conditions that cannot be exceeded if humanity is to develop and thrive into the future. Abrupt or irreversible environmental changes could result from crossing the boundaries, while respecting the boundaries reduces the risk of such changes.

The planetary boundaries framework does not aim to point fingers, recommend remedial actions, or proscribe certain behaviors. It acknowledges uncertainties in calculations and does not guarantee inevitable catastrophe. The idea is to identify theoretical limits and to wake us up to the risks of unbridled human contributions to environmental destabilization.

Here is the list of the Nine Planetary Boundaries, newly and more inclusively restated:

1. Climate change.
2. Change in biosphere integrity (biodiversity loss and species extinction).
3. Stratospheric ozone depletion.
4. Ocean acidification.
5. Biogeochemical flows (phosphorus and nitrogen cycles).
6. Land-system change (for example deforestation).
7. Freshwater use.
8. Atmospheric aerosol loading (microscopic particles in the atmosphere that affect climate and living organisms).
9. Introduction of novel entities (e.g., organic pollutants, radioactive materials, nano-materials, and micro-plastics).

Gloomy information, this, but the upside is emphasized: **knowledge gives us the opportunity to turn things around.** Reversal of ozone depletion is noted as an example of swift and effective response to looming disaster.

And this brings me to the point of my lecture. We lovers of oaks can congratulate ourselves, and renew our efforts, because we are doing more than most to reverse the loss of biodiversity and the destruction of Earth's woody cover. We are important, not like the state of Brazil could be, not like India and China could be, not like the mass of American consumers could be, but each of us by action and example makes changes to prospects for Earth's future. Each seedling we plant, each piece of lumber we recycle, each land-use hearing and restoration work-party we attend, each of a thousand small steps we take, contributes to the total body of individual actions that makes a difference.

We haven't assumed that science will come up with fixes, or that we can save ourselves by colonizing Mars, or that we as individuals will die, all privileges and comforts intact, before we live to see all those things we didn't think we would live to see, or that nothing matters anyway because Sun will consume Earth in a few billion years. We IOS supporters have not slipped into paralysis and inertia because of eco-despair. Some of us have more opportunity than others to create wider impact, working on a landscape or ecosystem scale and with institutional funding (Doug McCreary and his illustrious career at the University of California come to mind), but those large conservation efforts occur because there is popular demand for a reversal in established processes and outcomes.

In this issue of *International Oaks* we are informed of the announcement of yet another new oak species in Mexico, three new hybrids in Spain, the incredible richness of the intricate ecological complex that oaks and their forests represent, as well as the efforts of many of us to get out there and become acquainted first-hand with the world of oaks. All these are triumphs in our mission to spread appreciation of this grand group of trees, and to ensure that it flourishes into the distant future.

Diana Gardener