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Ralph Jimenez: Troubling baselines in a changing world

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A week or so ago, when the wind came up, the maple leaves hanging on for dear life far overhead fell almost in unison. It was a dry rattling rain of leaves that skittered along the pavement with a scratching noise like the Earth was scratching itself. It would, I thought, be a sound unheard a few generations ago, when roads and paths were unpaved. Our ancestors would have been startled by such a sound, one now considered normal, delightful even. The baseline of human experience has shifted.

Our world, at the age we are first able to remember it, forms a baseline memory. It becomes the norm, the point from which change, for good or ill, is measured. But with each generation the baseline shifts to a new “normal.”

There is, I believe, just one city street left in Concord that’s still a dirt road, Birch Street. It runs between Clinton Street and Ironworks Road, a broad lawn abutting apartments on one side, corn fields and community gardens on the other. It’s usually wash-boarded, the tires of vehicles going too fast lift on the rises and spin in the hollows deepening the ruts.



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The ruts are annoying and hard on vehicles but they help keep the dust down. Birch Street is a popular spot for bird watching. A half-dozen crows and a dozen or so pigeons shuffled about in the corn stubble that day, but gone are the great flocks of birds that once wheeled up from harvested fields. Gone too are the dances of summer butterflies and the galaxies of fireflies that flickered to life at sundown. Environmentally, the world today's children experience is much degraded. It should not be considered the new normal.

In 1995, a French marine fisheries biologist, Dr. Daniel Pauly, coined the term "shifting baseline syndrome" to explain why fishermen who returned with a catch that would have been considered terrible by their grandfathers, assessed the haul as normal. They had no memory of the bounty that once was, before stocks were degraded by over-fishing, pollution, dams and climate changes.

New Hampshire's climate and its woods are changing. Three decades ago we carried a saw when snowshoeing to camp because branches that were once overhead were, when walking on three or more feet of accumulated snow, in the way. Now, it's rare to have enough snow to cross-country ski let alone snowshoe.

The Massachusetts writer and philosopher Henry David Thoreau set a baseline for today's botanists and naturalists with his journals, which in some 2 million words starting in 1852 dutifully noted, among other observations, the blooming times of a host of plants. Thanks to global warming, high-bush blueberries, for example, bloom up to six weeks earlier than they did in Thoreau's day.

I've lived on the same land long enough to note some changes. A few were predictable. Fields untended disappear. Junipers round the corners, sumac, gray birch, chokecherries and other scrub trees move in. Fields become woods. In the scrub years I could walk out the backdoor in late afternoon and often return with a grouse for dinner. Now, one could spend a day and still get skunked.

The trees themselves are different. Not just bigger, but different. The oaks, red mostly, sugar maple and ash were slowly supplanted by beech trees whose horizontal branches made walking difficult and shaded out other species, including once prolific pink ladyslippers.

Beech like it warmer. But now, the big beeches that seeded that change, including the one I carved to commemorate our son's birth, are dying. So are the ash. The culprits appear to be climate change and globalization. Invading insects, emerald ash borer beetles from Asia, and European aphids that cause beech bark scale, an attack that allows a fatal fungus to invade the trees, are decimating our little patch of forest. They are setting a new baseline, one I don't want to become the new normal but probably can't do anything about.



I worry about other shifting baselines too, human ones. Has the incivility, obscenity, meanness, scorn of science, public service and truth itself of the past four years set a new baseline? We can do something about that. We can, in word and deed, say "no" and reverse the shift.

(Ralph Jimenez of Concord is a member of the Monitor's editorial board.)

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