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Common Experience Contest

Essay Entry

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The Importance of Remaining Blue in the
Quest for Understanding How to “Green” the Earth.

By Michael Paul Maupin

We are water. Nothing verdant or fertile, clean or pure can exist in the absence of Hydrogen and Oxygen married together in Nature. Rivers support our industry, rain our agriculture, erosion our awe. A tiny drop of water can freeze into a pattern so geometrically perfect and distinct it rivals the human fingerprint in complexity. A snowflake in Alaska can light on our tongues for the pleasure of a second, while the same elements once akin to momentary survival can become part of a rushing river responsible for carving the grandest of canyons with the determination of an epoch. Water can be heavy or hoary, holy or hard. This is the substance we all have in common; a universal medium linking life and nature, past and present, and gives the promise of a tangible future. When nothing else can, water will.

The Ancients held that water was one of the four basic pillars of existence along with fire, earth, and air. But so important was their belief in the necessity of water that they postulated it must coexisted somehow within the other three: fire was the absence of water, earth held water in the soil, and the air was rife with the cottony essence of water waiting to pour out. Our philosophical forefathers weren't the only ones to draw a link between liquid water and the propitiation of the understanding of our physical world. To the Chinese, water was a blue dragon to be revered; to the Hindi, water was one of the five Panchamahabhuta, a substance known as *jala* that helped to explain the existence of everything else; and for the Japanese, water is simply known as 水 (pronounced “sui”). Where the divisions of religious belief separate society from society, and where idealistic congregates with the pragmatic, water is the common of all differences.

Ages before July 20, 1969, astronomers looked away from our planet to the bright, luminescent globe of the moon. In romanticized musings, the moon was assumed to have been created in much the same state as the only planet humans have ever called home. Within the machinations of scientific thought burst forth names such as *Mare Imbrium*, *Mare Tranquillitatis*, and *Mare Fecunditatis*, to only

name three. The less reflective spots on the moon were christened *Maria*, for surely the moon, if nothing else, would have the single most important aspect for the propagation of life. Those navel-gazing proto-astronauts would never see the day when their speculations turned to reality, albeit on a much smaller scale. On a rock, a lifeless ball 236,121 some-odd miles from the very oceans it helps to peak and trough twice daily, water ice was discovered in the perpetual midnight of the deepest craters of the lunar landscape.

As time passed and human ingenuity lead us further and further from our blue planet, water was found in the atmospheres of Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and as ices of Saturn. Now the discussion of liquid water on Saturn's moon Enceladus and Jupiter's Europa has rekindled the idea of extraterrestrial life in its most miniscule forms. So important is the idea of water on other planets that astronomers aren't looking for signs and wonders of alien civilizations in the form of space ships, little green men, or Hollywood interpretations of wayfaring intergalactic tourists. Instead they look for water. If anything is going to exist, if anything or anyone is going to "become," then water will *be* before life *is*.

Much has been made about the "greening" of the Earth and "going green," but I fear an oversight has been made when thinking of the preservation of our planet through the lens of habitat rehabilitation. In the simplest equations, children much too young to understand the urgency of environmental literacy and awareness already hold the keys to understand the importance of water conservation above all else. "Yellow + Blue = Green."

As Human Beings, we have no control, nor want, for the "yellow." It's given to us freely by our star. It comes like clockwork each and every day because it once was the basis of the clockwork. The yellow is free and often dismissed without much of a thought as to what is really is. Yet, the blue, our water, the first true template for the mantra "recycle and reuse" was doing just that well before humans took to taking their water for granted. Much like the fragile life cycle of the ones that need water for their ultimate benefit, water has a death and resurrection story all its own. Vapor to precipitation, precipitation to nourishment, nourishment to run-off, run-off to evaporation, and the cycle begins again. It's echoed in ourselves much like the idea of life born into creation, growing and evolving, aging and being aware of

one's dwindling self, and then the return of the body to the organic compounds by which it came to be. And all the while the cycle repeats—birth, to death, and birth again in an expression of renewal. This is the water cycle; a very real parallel to the spiritual renewal of the creatures who depend of the water that shares their same life and development as we.

The idea of making our world green is inconceivable without first trying to keep it blue. When the Apollo astronauts looked back at where they'd been, they did not remark at how "green" their home was. And if you close your eyes and picture what you recall as a lonely sphere dotted in so much surrounding blackness, it isn't green that you picture in your mind. No, we are a blue orb wisped with a vale of white swirling and churning high above us. Liquid water and water vapor waiting for its chance to be more than just a mist will-less to an atmospheric breeze.

The "greening" of our planet is inconsequential if we cannot keep it blue. Oil production catastrophes, overfishing and the neglect of preserving other sea life, and the attitude that whatever goes down the kitchen drain or sewer pipes somehow ceases to exist is the dénouement to a tragic final scene in Humankind's future. The environment isn't only painted in shades of green. Instead it is the same greens we concern ourselves with defending spread over an aqua blue canvas. A painter cannot paint a masterpiece without a canvas to frame it, and humans cannot save the environment without the recognition that, without water, there is no canvas we can spread our paint.