



# MOVING CLOUDS:

## Perspectives on Our Environment

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## INTRODUCTION

Moving Clouds is rooted in a pair of inter-locking assumptions: one, that we can consciously change society, and two, that we must change it. These fundamental concepts are often lost in the blur of technological advance known as progress. We are conditioned to believe that "new" always means "improved", that corporate executives know best, and that resource scarcity is merely the paranoia of pessimists. 'Progress' is a headlong force trampling us into apathetic acceptance, whereas change is a product shaped by our hopes and needs. Though this nation was raised on questioning of authority, innovation, and grassroots decision-making, we have grown complacent and stagnant, nestling ourselves comfortably into the status quo and raising the blanket of 'progress' about us.

Society in general, and education in particular, dictate to us that a) things are best the way they are and b) even if they weren't, you are one of countless individuals so it would be best to simply mind your own business and make sure it's a profitable one. In school, we are seldom taught to question our lifestyles - individual or collective - and we are given only shallow exposure to other cultures and belief systems. We are told early on that we are "developed, civilized" people, unlike "primitive" Native Americans and third world peoples. Rather than reexamine our lifestyles in light of their more environmentally sound, communally based approaches, we close ourselves off to change, labeling ourselves a superior breed. Rarely are young people taught organizing skills for change.

In a climate so inconducive to rational, grassroots change, destruction that could be forestalled continues its reckless course. One need not be a fatalist to be frightened by the number of societal and global crises: overpopulation, starvation, environmental contamination, diminishing resources, and the threat of nuclear holocaust. They stand as a pressing reminder that we must change if we are to survive.

Moving Clouds is a best-case scenario for how that change will occur, the optimistic end of a pessimistic outlook. Through books such as this, education, and cooperative action, we may still effect a positive change of our own design. If destructive trends go unchecked, however, change will take a devastating form.

Confronting the need for change is difficult. Moving Clouds provides a 'hard look' at human ecology and its concomitant tensions: 'hard' not in the sense of a detached, value-free assessment, but in the personal sense of seeing and feeling how human exploitation, greed, and violence cause widespread suffering. The common ground of these writings lies in their personal perspectives. The authors do not paint sweeping abstractions of societal trends or write with blithe objectivity about global threats. They examine broader issues where they hit home-- in how each of us reacts, copes, creates, loves, and fears.

Examining broader issues through the authors' individual outlooks, we may fit ourselves into the crisis collage. It becomes harder to deny that we are part of the problem as well as an integral part of the solution. Sharing the authors' unabashedly personal perspectives, we can find new insights into ourselves, connect ideas of our own that never seemed related, and give structure to thoughts that have lain dormant and amorphous. The writings in Moving Clouds

can be a springboard back to our own experiences and memories. Witnessing the authors' personal struggles with societal and global problems, we may gain the strength necessary to question our own assumptions, and reexamine our values and needs.

The authors' personal perspectives cut a wide swatch across society. Writings in Moving Clouds come from Native Americans and other minorities, women, foreigners, and children's authors as well as more established male naturalists. While the background of each writer limits his/her perspective on broad issues, collectively they illustrate many angles of human ecology. Like the fabled blind men describing an elephant, their individual views are restricted, but their collective portrayal is telling.

The format of this anthology echoes the heterogeneity of authors. The collection blends a medley of photos, cartoons, song lyrics, essays, paragraphs, and poems. In his book The Journey Home, Edward Abbey describes the ingredients and purpose of a similar philosophical medley:

Fragments of autobiography, journalistic battle debris, nightmares and daydreams, bits and butts of outdoor philosophizing all stirred together in a blackened iron pot over a smoking fire... Agitate. Redneck slumgullion, like any stew, makes a tasty, nutritious, and coherent whole. And why not? Society, too, human society is like a stew - if you don't keep it stirred up you get a lot of scum on top. Coherent or not, these chunks of words share one common theme: the need to make sense of private experience by exploring the connections and contradictions among wildness and wilderness, community and anarchy, between civilization and human freedom.

The theme of Moving Clouds is not so specific. This anthology is intended to be a stepping stone to new realms - be they philosophical, aesthetic, physical, or emotional. Passages in this book may entice you to venture outdoors and study with the Great Spirit (the Indian's name for Nature's teaching). You may become more aware of the natural world; noting patterns - of leaves outside your kitchen window, of clouds on a grey day, of stars on a dark night. Maybe you will consider your surroundings on a larger scale.

If all this seems abstract, it is. Experience in nature is the epitome of a "guess you had to be there" situation. John Fowles describes the paradox of second-hand experience in his article "Seeing Nature Whole":

This kind of knowledge [of nature], or relationship, is not reproducible by any other means - by painting, by photography, by words, by science itself. They may encourage, foster, and help induce the art of the relationship: but they cannot reproduce it...

Moving Clouds can never capture the wonder of first-hand experience. But whatever our environment - be it wilderness waterways, or a congested urban setting - awareness through words and pictures may lead to greater appreciation for our surroundings.

While written words are only the distilled essence of concrete experience, they are a link to greater understanding: understanding which I hope you will find in these pages. After working with some of these pieces for three years, I am amazed at the emotional waves that still break over me when I read these passages. There is a comforting ebb and flow to the works, where the raw disgust I share with one author, smarting like an open sore, is soothed by the unruffled tranquility of another. Many of the questions these writers ask are ones that have lain unformed in the recesses of my mind. As my own thoughts take shape with their words, I celebrate the commonality that lurks among us. It is often hard for us to admit what we share with other people for it implicates us in the violence and oppression rampant among our race. But in reading these passages, we can feel the strength and hope that also resides in our common ground.