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## OPINIONS

### Fully in Tact: Remember what you've seen here

By **Sabrina Noble**

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I realized the other day that, after another year or two, the student body won't remember the time when the grass once stretched from Old Main to Campbell Avenue, uninterrupted by the ILC. They won't remember the passionate student protests over construction, or the battle to save the cactus garden.

In other words, without former generations to remind them of what was, future students will - for better or worse - content themselves with what is.

This is also true of the natural world. If you've ever heard your grandmother reminisce over how the lake was once much cleaner, or the prairie much wider, or the city much smaller, you're witnessing a case of "Back When ..." Syndrome.

There's another term for this that we'd do well to know: shifting baselines.

"Shifting baselines" was coined in 1995 by a fisheries biologist named Daniel Pauly. It addresses man's constantly changing idea of what is "normal" for our world as it becomes more and more degraded by human influences. In other words, we are gradually lowering our standards, accepting conditions we once would have protested.

Shifting baselines are insidious, in that they take us further and further away from the reality of what is natural. Today, when we see commercials for Caribbean cruises we're astonished by the vast schools of multicolored fish. The beaches are beautiful, and the tropics are pristine, right?

Wrong. "Pristine" is defined as "the original state." Once, the Caribbean swarmed with life that would dumbfound us today if we saw it. But we've never seen it in our lifetimes, nor have our parents. In fact, anyone who might have seen it is now dead - and since no one's recorded the "original state" of the sea, we're unaware of what the oceans once were. We



Illustration by Holly Randall

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don't miss what we never had; we instead are satisfied with less and less.

One organization has founded itself upon this menacing problem. It's called Shifting Baselines and was founded in 2002 after forging partnerships with The Ocean Conservancy, The World Wildlife Fund, Scripps Institution of Oceanography and many others. It states in no uncertain terms that the world's oceans are in serious decline - and that, because of our shifting baselines, it's worse than any of us can really fathom.

What's especially disturbing is that even if we labor to return the watery world to a baseline we remember - say, from the 1950s - we might still be falling well short of the "true" baseline, which was some time before negative human impact. The organization site provides an excellent example of this:

"Today, salmon in the Columbia river are twice what they were in the 1930s, which sounds great - if that's your baseline. But the fact is, in the '30s, salmon were only 10 percent of what they were in the 1800s."

Similarly, anyone who's been to the zoo has seen signs outside various cages stating these animals, which were once plentiful in the wild, now live only in captivity. We can count on our fingers species our children will likely never see, and many more that were already extinct long before we were born.

These startling extinctions are just as prevalent in the oceans; they're just harder to see since the oceans are deep and dark. Researchers believe "the North Atlantic fisheries will disappear completely before today's 5-year-olds learn to drive." Other fisheries and species of fish will follow, and then what will remain? Will future generations convince themselves that seas full of bacteria and jellyfish are the norm? Will they believe such desolation is "natural?"

Even now our environment is not the same "natural" as our great-grandparents' environment - and theirs, in turn, was certainly not the "natural" world that the earliest explorers witnessed.

But then, mankind has always had a short memory when it comes to the environment. So many species slip away because of our characteristic lack of moderation, and we become desensitized to the tragedies taking place every day in our rainforests and oceans.

But this time Grandma's not exaggerating, and the Earth can no longer afford our forgetfulness. We must remember what we've seen today, yesterday and tomorrow. We must document what we find and mark change.

The environment remembers. Now, so must we.

Otherwise, all we'll pass on to the next generation is dead memories.

Sabrina Noble is a senior majoring in English and creative writing. She demands that you watch the [shiftingbaselines.org](http://shiftingbaselines.org) slide show. She can be reached at [letters@wildcat.arizona.edu](mailto:letters@wildcat.arizona.edu).

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