

[Baselines shifting every day](#)

By Humour

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Let us examine a new scientific buzzword I've encountered, something called shifting baselines.

Essentially, shifting baselines is a \$5 way of saying "things ain't what they used to be."

Shifting baselines refers specifically to chronic, slow, hard-to-notice changes in just about anything. The term was coined by University of British Columbia biology professor Daniel Pauly in a 2003 book *In a Perfect Ocean*.

Pauly used it in discussing the diminished fish population. Since then, Pauly has noticed that you can apply shifting baselines to pretty much anything

To no one's surprise, most shifting baselines are shifting for the worse, but there are exceptions.

For instance, not many years ago, living for 80 years was considered quite a feat.

Today, thanks to shifting baselines, we're awash in disgustingly healthy 80-year-olds. This is a good thing for the most part, unless the newly-minted 80-year-olds are of the especially cranky variety.

Within my lifetime there were just two or three TV stations available to the average Canadian, which were available only on crummy black-and-white screens. You could say that was the baseline. Now we have 100 channels we can watch on 52-inch plasma screens.

The biggest problem with detecting shifting baselines is that they are so glacially slow we don't really notice the change.

A perfect example is the size of kids today. Within the year, my almost

16-year-old son will be taller than me, and he's of average height for a teenager today. Kids in their early to mid-teens are growing at a fierce rate, far out of proportion to what we would consider the result of simple evolution.

Is this rapid growth caused by what we're feeding our cows, or improvements in nutrition, or some secret additive in Coca-Cola? Nobody knows, but if this trend continues, the children of our children will average 6'4", resulting in the extra-large of today being the mere medium of tomorrow.

Call it a waistline shift.

Here's another. When I was a little shaver, you could safely watch TV ads without fear of having an embarrassing question about the product advertised. The baseline shifted when it became acceptable to advertise bras, which led to a rash of commercials with smiling, shirtless women prancing about to one of the great TV jingles of all time ("We care about the shape you're in ... wonderful, wonderful ... Wonderbra-a-a-a!").

Until a few years ago, you'd never see an ad for any of the myriad of 'feminine products' that fill the pink-hued aisles of the drug store these days.

And even if there was a product like Viagra back in the 1960s, there is no way it would ever be advertised, much less with celebrity spokesmen.

(Memo to celebrities: no matter how poor you are or how much they offer you, or how starved for attention you may be, it's just not worth it to be a pitchman for erectile dysfunction medication or adult diapers.)

Some of you may remember when we expected clerks in a store to be familiar with the product they sold, and helpful.

That was the baseline – if you worked in the service industry, you were expected to ... how can I put this? ... "serve" the customer!

That's a good one. It's a sign of how much things have changed that today that when I get speedy, knowledgeable service from a clerk in a store or a waiter in a restaurant, I'm actually surprised!

The biggest concern about baseline shifts is that not only do we expect things to get worse, but we have come to accept the degradation of just about everything as inevitable.

Truly, this acceptance of baseline shifts is a tragedy of monumental proportions with repercussions for all of mankind.

But ... who cares?

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