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Normal Is a Moving Target

Shifting Baselines Measure How Far We've Come -- or Gone

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"Everything is sex," says Jakeila Atkinson. "It didn't used to be that way."

Just a couple of days before her 21st birthday, Atkinson is sitting at a bus stop on Minnesota Avenue NE on her way home from a job interview. She's talking about popular music and about the ways younger kids dress and talk, but she is also getting at something else, something omnipresent and profound.

Even at her springy age, she knows that the world around her is in nonstop flux, but she can't quite put her finger on how to explain it. Without realizing it, Atkinson is zeroing in on two lines: the one that runs across the bottom of how we expect the world to be and the one that runs across the top of the world that we will tolerate. Those lines are constantly changing position in cultural space.

It's a notion called "shifting baselines."

You find it mostly in the scientific realm.

Shifting baselines "are the chronic, slow, hard-to-notice changes in things, from the disappearance of birds and frogs in the countryside to the increased drive time from Los Angeles to San Diego," writes marine biologist Randy Olson. "If your ideal weight used to be 150 pounds and now it's 160, your baseline -- as well as your waistline -- has shifted."

A recent issue of the *Lancet* notes a "shifting baseline of structural influences" in countries undergoing "rapid social and economic transition." A research institute's report in *Medicine & Law Weekly* refers to the shifting baseline of steroids in the body.

The term was coined by Daniel Pauly, a biology professor at the University of British Columbia and co-author of the 2003 book "In a Perfect Ocean." He first used it to describe how certain fish populations have diminished over the years. But since then he has observed shifting baselines everywhere he has looked.

You know them when you see them. Some baselines have risen over time. We're enjoying longer life spans; we expect more from technology; we have more types of cuisine to choose from these days. Many others have fallen. Clothing is more suggestive; language and manners are coarser; privacy rights have been eroded.

We have surrendered to longer drive-times. In the past decade, the average one-way commute in the Washington area has increased 10 percent. Air quality has deteriorated. In 1996 the Washington area experienced 12 bad-air days -- Code Orange or worse; in the summer of 2006 there were 17. We routinely accept the fact that tap water is not potable. According to the Earth Policy Institute, the planetary consumption of bottled water increased from 98 billion liters in 1999 to 154 billion liters in 2004.

"If you keep accepting lower baselines," says the Institute's Lester R. Brown, "you could be accepting the demise of civilization."

The size of phone bills, the price of gas, the number of pills we take, how often we eat at restaurants, hemlines, hairlines, legroom on airlines -- all shifting baselines.

Or means. Norms. Benchmarks. Yardsticks. Whatever you call them.

Ty Carlisle, director of the Los Angeles-based Web site <http://ShiftingBaselines.org>-- developed to explore Pauly's notion -- says that understanding the approximate natural state of things is essential when it comes to watchdogging the environment. By knowing the ancient levels of water tables and bacteria in drinking water, researchers can understand the positive or negative effects of humans.

The Web site features bummed-out people. Professional surfer Pat O'Connell says he has become complacent: "I've accepted the degraded world we have created. I'm no longer fighting the source of the problems but instead I've readjusted to accept this as natural."

When San Diego councilwoman Donna Frye was growing up, her parents would take her to the beach. "If I had a cut on my hand," Frye says on the site, her parents would urge her to "get out in the ocean and go for a swim because it will help it heal more quickly."

Today high school surfers in San Clemente, Calif., are given hepatitis shots every year because the waters are so polluted.

The site also provides links to current, pertinent stories and video ads starring comedian Jack Black and Cedric Yarbrough of "Reno 911!"

For the most part, a shifted baseline suggests a lowered expectation, a settling for less.

But the concept also has "a very positive purpose," says Pauly, the father of the phrase. It's a necessary defense mechanism that enables humankind to adapt and evolve. "It means we can endure loss," he says, and that we can make adjustments to an ever-changing environment.

New generations are able to start fresh. "If we could transfer vivid emotions about grief and things done to us," Pauly says, "we would paralyze the next generation."

When things decline, he says, "they don't go from 'abundant' to 'absent.'" Changes occur incrementally. It is only possible to see the changes, and change the changes, if baselines are established and people can identify the changes.

Humans have the ability to adapt, he says. "A species has emerged on Earth that has the ability to comprehend and anticipate the things that might render it extinct. We for the first time can see the things that can do us in."

That is why people must identify which baselines are important and essential. And hold to them. "Knowledge of the past," he says, "helps us know where to go."

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