

Over: The American Landscape at the Tipping Point

A Lecture at Cary, a book at Merritt Books

By Stephen Kaye

Sprawl, in its singular American form of geometric shapes, sprawls across the American landscape like a national disease of pandemic proportions. Seen from the aerial photographs by Alex McLean who spoke at the Cary Institute Friday, the question was not so much as "how did this ever happen" as "what do we do now?"

The now question is asked in the context of the environment that has been ignored and trivialized. Where will the water come from is a question asked as we see the lake formed by a dam in the Colorado River down by 100 feet. The lake supplies 35 million people in Southern California, Phoenix and Las Vegas. We see brilliant green grass of golf courses in Las Vegas surrounded by desert. We see the sprawl that is Phoenix covering miles of desert, tiny lawns green by the diminishing supply of precious water. And we see coastal communities perched tenuously on disappearing beaches, vainly holding on as the land around them slides off into the encroaching and rising sea.

Pictures of the shrinking snowpack of the Rocky mountains leads to pictures of Lake Mead down by 100 feet. The spaghetti of interstate cloverleaves, ever more complex and expensive, aid and abets our commitment to gas-guzzling automobiles that consume \$700 billion of imported fuels a year and generate 40,000 highway deaths.

The impressiveness of a huge electric generating plant is immediately shattered when we hear that it takes a billion

gallons of water a day to cool the condensers and that the heated water dumped into the adjoining bay has destroyed the fishing for miles around because the heated water lacks sufficient oxygen to support marine life. At what cost do we use electricity to power our televisions and air conditioners?

A nuclear plant in Texas needs 130 miles of canals to absorb the heat from its cooling pumps. Along the Delaware coast, thousands of houses have been built on wetlands threatened by a rising sea level. Miami and Miami Beach seem likely to soon be under water.

Over, The America, Landscape at the Tipping Point was first published in French with the title *An American Ecological Absurdity*. The pictures make us seem absurd. We have done about the most stupid thing imaginable. We have trashed our landscape, our ecological lifelines, our support systems of air, water and land. We are committing suicide pushing the environment beyond the tipping point. The message is given in weekly and now daily lectures around the world – the seas, the atmosphere and the land can't absorb any more pollution, any more CO2, any more nitrogen, any more heated water, any more mercury, any more emissions from carbon fuels. The cod are starving because there isn't enough plankton in their feeding grounds. Call it global warming or call it warming oceans. The planet is threatened by the activities of man. The once lush farmlands of southern New Jersey that once produced food that fed millions is now poor suburbs that produces deficits, pollution, traffic congestion and global warming. The graphic pictures of failed housing developments, of housing sprawling across deserts or California's best farmland should serve as a warning. But it's now too late. The damage has been done. The time for warnings is past. It's now time to think about what we do now. At this point the lecture ends, the lights come on and we go back to our reality. Or our delusions. If you missed the lecture you can buy the book, published in large format by Abrams. \$45 at Merritt Books.