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Looking Into the Long Now

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You have heard of the Long March, The Long Goodbye, and “Get Along, Little Doggies,” but do you know about the Long Now? Give me a minute, and I'll tell you about it.

The Long Now is a Foundation that was established in 01996. The name is a term coined by founding board member musician Brian Eno. When Eno moved from England to New York City, he discovered that here and now meant “this room and this five minutes.” England had a larger here and a longer now. The Long Now Foundation has adopted Eno's term. Their goal is to stretch what people consider as now. To make their point they are building a 10,000-year clock.

The clock is intended to be an icon to long-term thinking. When finished it will stand 60 feet tall in a remote southwestern location in the United States. It will tick once a year, bong once a century, and the cuckoo will come out once every millennium. Wait a second. One cuckoo every millennium? That's right. One cuckoo every millennium. Compared to these guys, Al Gore is a weekend gardener complaining about a heat wave.

The Long Now Foundation doesn't think our short attention span, short-horizon, market-driven, next-election, multi-tasking perspective is amusing. They think it is a big problem.

Long Now Co-chairman Danny Hillis wants everyone to be more like the British Johnny Appleseed. “I think of the oak beams in the ceiling of College Hall at New College, Oxford,” Hillis says. “Last century, when the beams needed replacing, carpenters used oak trees that had been planted in 1386 when the dining hall was first built. The 14th-century builder had planted the trees in anticipation of the time, hundreds of years in the future, when the beams would need replacing. Did the carpenters plant new trees to replace the beams again a few hundred years from now?” I suppose we could go online and try to find out about those trees, but who has time for that? Besides, I have a 620-word limit. What does this have to do with aggregate? A lot, really.

The oldest rocks on Earth have been around for 4 billion years. That's 4 million cuckoos. The glacial sand and gravels we mine are approximately 50 million years old, or 500,000 cuckoos.

Who understands the poetry of silence and slow time better than the geologist? Who is more patient than the stonecutter who harvests a limestone bed compressed molecule by molecule

over centuries? Long before the Long Now it was our industry that provided the icons of time. From the pyramids to the Parthenon, to the Roman roads, to the Aztec temples, the most enduring and inspiring face of civilization is a record of our processes, our sweat and our vision.

We should be seen as the proprietors of time-conscious, responsible, corporate citizenship; instead, in some communities, we are the opposite. Quarry management can be a symbol of shortsightedness. Blasting disturbs neighborhoods, spent quarries are discovered to have been filled with toxic waste, underground mining disrupts the water table, and gravel trucks tear up roads and spill rock.


We should make the Long Now project our own. I know these guys sound weird, but maybe they have a good idea. Aren't we really selling longevity? Isn't endurance the main reason to build with stone?

If we took the Long view we could turn our image problems around in a New York minute. That reminds me, the Long Now uses five-digit dates. The extra zero will solve an anticipated deca-millennium bug, which will become a problem around 8,000 years from now. I told you these guys were weird.

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