

The sky is falling...

...said Chicken Little and the Boy who Cried Wolf understood.

Alarmist or realist? That is the judgement you need to make as you read Helga Vierich's **Benefit of Foresight** piece in this issue. It is a long time since we published one of these personal reviews and this is certainly one to challenge academic complacency.

Applied anthropology rarely features in the pages of *Before Farming* and it is even more unusual to have an opinion voiced about the future of our species, let alone that of our discipline, so, my apologies to the other contributors to this issue if, for once, I focus on this unusual contribution in my editorial.

Helga's experience as an anthropologist, engaged at the frontline of development-related aid in Africa, informs her challenge to the western mantra of economic growth as the solution to the ills of poverty. Subsistence farmers and hunter-gatherers have, through generations of trial and error, developed economic strategies suited to their environments and needs – those achievements should be understood and respected by those imposing change in the name of progress.

Sustainability is certainly a buzzword with practical currency (my academic department now has a sustainability officer to recommend the switching off of unused lights and computers – common sense with a title) and Helga places it at the forefront of what she sees as a pending global catastrophe. No, not climate change – though certainly linked – but our utter dependence on fossil fuels for food, medicine, communication and - well just about everything we take for granted in a post-industrial internet-infused world. Helga isn't saying something new in drawing attention to the inherent risks of having all our economic eggs in one proverbial basket (yes, another chicken reference), but it is the scale of the potential forthcoming social and political upheaval that gives her sleepless nights. Time to pull up the drawbridges and protect our cultural heritage from the hordes at the gate, literally.

Perhaps she is crying wolf, in which case we can politely ignore the message of this self-confessed disaffected anthropologist and place her among the tribe of naïve doom-mongers, uttering a tut-tut for an academic who has lost her sense of critical awareness and scientific impartiality. Dismissal would be easy: 'just the facts mam' (apologies to those old enough to be fans of *Dragnet*). If nothing else, Helga highlights a potential growth area for future generations of anthropologists in what could be called 'transition studies'. Even if we are not engulfed by apocalyptic turmoil, social change will take place at all levels of society as we adapt in the years to come to a reduced reliance on fossil fuels and the uncertain impacts of climate change. It's happening already – for example, the spread of increasingly self-reliant communities or 'transition towns' - and anthropologists working with sociologists are well placed to observe the process cross-culturally, as well as at home.

There is a future, then, for anthropologists and, according to Helga, a future for hunter-gatherers - old *and* new.

The Editor
Liverpool, June 2009