HUMAN NATURE FUELING GLOBAL WARMING: OP-ED

The MAD principle -- mutually assured destruction -- brought an end to the nuclear arms race of the Cold War. I'm convinced that serious attention to MAD is the only thing that will keep us from completely trashing our planetary home.

This thought was precipitated by an unusual pairing of experiences: my annual trip to north-central Minnesota for the Thorson family reunion, and my bedside reading of E.O. Wilson's newest and somewhat fatalistic book, "The Social Conquest of Earth."

Our extended family had a wonderful time during three days of tribal bonding at the family's lakeside cabin. My six siblings showed up to help celebrate my dad's 90th birthday. But beneath the surface was some unspoken anxiety about how global change is eroding the stable center of our lives.

Heat advisories were acute. The fire threat was severe. Broiling drought across the upper Midwest had ruined the crops. Lake levels were being dropped by the Army Corps of Engineers to keep the Mississippi navigable. Our lake was pea green from an algal bloom denser and earlier than usual. Important shade trees had been blown away by a "straight-line" (tornado-like) wind a week earlier, the first in memory. The temperature of the lake was remarkably tepid, unable to generate a significant breeze.

So what did we do? We jostled for space in front of a new, 30-inch, industrial-scale fan my brother bought to help cope with the stultifying 100-degree heat. We plugged it into coal-fired electricity to create the breeze our greenhouse-warmed lake could not.

And for lunch? A four-meat pizza with white-bread crust and gobs of cheese. Believe it or not, that's the best-selling frozen pizza being sold in bars and taverns in the upper Midwest by my little brother, whose Minnesota-based company manufactures, sells and distributes them throughout the region. His business depends on giving his customers what they want, not what they should want.

What they should want is to eat healthy and low on the food chain. Doing so would help unclog the arteries of our shared public health care system, and help solve ethical and environmental problems associated with feedlot agriculture, factory slaughterhouses and chemical additives. But what they really want is chewy meat between their teeth, lots of salt and a quick fix of starchy energy, served in a cozy social place.

This internal conflict is hard-wired into human nature because it evolved from two opposing levels of natural selection. That of the individual, which accounts for the sum total of our selfish and private behaviors. And that of the group, which accounts for our equally important public behaviors such as loyalty, religion, altruism and political correctness. Without individual selection, none of us could have become the fine specimens we are: able to stand up straight, chew our food, make tools, lead others, escape predation, program a computer and throw a spear. And without group selection, our clan caves and territories would have been quickly usurped by competitors with better teamwork, our women taken and our children sold into slavery.

For social species like us, individual and group selection must be balanced, as they were throughout human evolution to the rise of civilizations. But now we're imbalanced, thrown off by the abstraction that we must cooperate globally. This thought runs counter to visceral human nature, which evolved from both individual triumph and group cooperation at the level of the family band and tribe. Cooperating at larger scales, for example religious denominations, political parties or cobbled-together nations is hard enough. Doing so at the level of the planet is almost unthinkable. Yet that's
exactly what we must do. Eating a four-meat pizza in front of a coal-fired electric fan feels good because it feels natural, whether in your family or mine. The thought of sacrificing my family solidarity and American prosperity for those beyond my group feels bad because it runs counter to my human nature. Yet that is what we must do democratically. Otherwise MAD is assured.