TIME TO PUT HUMANS BACK IN NATURE

As the new year begins, I'm scrounging for hope. I've been wracking my brain for a resolution that will bounce me out of bed in the morning, despite my concerns for the next four years.

After some pretty desperate digging, I found something that works for me. I will promulgate the word "Anthropocene." This is a portmanteau, meaning a word that combines two seemingly separate ideas into one convenient package. In this case, "anthro" equals humanity and "cene" equals geological epoch. Using this doublet conveys the truth that planet Earth is so pervasively and dramatically transformed by its 7 billion souls that we've entered a whole new epoch of earthly existence. A post-environmental epoch.

The word environment comes from environs, which means to surround. By definition, it's the actual world we live in, everything from the clutter in your kitchen to the birds in your backyard. But beginning in the 1960s, the scope of this word was narrowed as a general synonym for nonhuman nature. For example, the Wilderness Act of 1964 and the Endangered Species Act of 1973 dealt largely on the otherness of nature. Dominating the debates were aesthetic and ethical considerations that constrained human opportunity for the benefit of nonhuman interests.

By the 1970s, this idea of humans vs. nonhumans was morphing into one that pitted good humans against bad humans. On the first Earth Day, April 22, 1970, cartoonist Walt Kelly's protagonist Pogo famously said, "We have met the enemy and he is us." This defined the struggle as mainly between those who pollute and those who work to halt pollution. This struggle created a whole new sector of the American economy and a whole new regulatory realm in government. The label "environmentalist" (a term I have never embraced for myself) was affixed to someone committed to the care of nature. Environmentalism became an ideology on par with racism, sexism, patriotism, Nazism and so forth. This political football gradually inflated over the next half-century.

Divisive politics continued during the next four decades as the game grew to global proportions. Environmentalism became an international high-stakes sport with debates about depleted fishing stocks, gyres of plastic debris in the ocean, bleaching of coral reefs, melting ice, rising sea level and climate change. Resistance to progress strengthened as the environmental issues grew too large and too complex for the average voter to comprehend, or too remote from daily experience. This rendered environmental issues vulnerable to exploitation by powerful corporations and political candidates.

Twenty years ago, American political football was nicely summed up by historian Richard White in his essay, "Are You an Environmentalist, or Do You Work for a Living?" The pitting of jobs against the environment has since become a red herring, now that the creation of so-called "green" jobs has outpaced those in sectors based on resource extraction.

My hope is that the ideology captured by the word "Anthropocene" will replace the one called environmentalism. This will help dissolve the fiction that nature and human nature are separate entities. And, if we can see the whole planet as something we've created together, then we're more likely to join forces to care for it properly.

Pogo's maxim for the environmental movement was "We have met the enemy and he is us." I don't like this anymore. I suggest we revisit the popular song title "We Are the World," but tweak its title to "We Are the Planet," and extend the lyrics to include the whole of the planet, not just the different human groups.
It took a leap of the imagination to develop an environmental consciousness. Now we need another leap.

If we can get our collective heads around the big idea of Anthropocene thinking, then taking care of the planet will be seen as a form of self-care, as natural as brushing our teeth.