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Correction Appended

Taking the long, **long view**

BYLINE: Cameron Smith

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Information without context is meaningless. What does it matter, for instance, that plans are being readied to plunder Ontario's northern boreal forest for pulp wood if you don't know that it takes 250 to 350 years to replace trees that grow so far north?

If you haven't read Richard Leakey's *The Sixth Extinction* (Random House of Canada Ltd., \$21 in paperback), what does it matter that Prime Minister Paul Martin has shied away from implementing the Kyoto accord to reduce greenhouse gases?

If you have read the book, Martin's retreat matters a lot.

There have been five major extinctions of species in the past 440 million years, Leakey says, and the sixth major extinction has begun, caused primarily by climate change and habitat destruction. If it continues unchecked, he says, it will be just as devastating as the one 65 million years ago that wiped out the dinosaurs.

Looked at in this way, context means future consequences that extend far beyond our normal frames of reference.

So I find it exciting that the Clock Of The Long Now is going to be built. It will tick once a day, chime every 100 years and run for 10,000 years. It will be mechanical (a working prototype is in the Science Museum in London, England) and it will sit in a mountaintop cave carved out of limestone cliffs near Nevada's Great Basin National Park.

It's the brainchild of Danny Hillis, a British computer prodigy who designs supercomputers, and Stewart Brand, a U.S. intellectual provocateur and former hippie, one of the Merry Pranksters clustered around author Ken Kesey during the 1960s.

Brand is the person driving the truck on page one of Tom Wolfe's *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, wearing a necktie made of Indian beads "on bare skin and a white butcher's coat with medals from the King of Sweden on it." Brand went on to publish the *Whole Earth Catalogue* and currently heads a consultancy called the Global Business Network. He and Hillis are co-chairs of the Long Now Foundation, which has a Web site at www.longnow.org.

"What we're doing with the clock," Brand has said, "is trying to understand a period of time reaching 10,000 years into the past (when the last ice age ended) and 10,000 years into the future as one containable thought.

"The idea is that you sort of move in the now and feel a responsibility for what happens in the now; if you can push the now out past your lifetime in a couple of directions, that's good. If you can push it way out, then that's (even) better."

Brand points out that in a hundred years, there will be more than twice as many people as there are now. So, existing trends of global warming, habitat destruction, resource depletion and toxic residues will have a greater impact on the unborn than ever before.

"The great value of the future is its inclusiveness," Brand has written. "We don't know what's coming, but we do know that we are in it together. To produce the benefits of greater co-operation, all you need to do is lengthen the shadow of the future."

Brand has written a book about the clock, *The Clock Of The Long Now* (HarperCollins, 2000, \$20.95). And there's a good interview with him at www.edge.org/3rd_culture/brand/brand_p2.html.

There's also an interesting profile published in *The Guardian* newspaper at www.guardian.co.uk/print/0,3858,4233515-103418,00.html.

I see the clock as a shrine to the possible. When it's built, I'm going to visit it. I'm sure I won't be alone.

is an author and environmentalist living near Gananoque, Ont.

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CORRECTION:

Contrary to a column last Saturday on the Environment page about plans for a Clock Of The Long Now that will tick once a day in a cave near Nevada's Great Basin National Park, the prototype clock, located at the Science Museum in London, England, still has unresolved technical problems and has been shut down. The Star regrets the error.

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