

Uncle Dave Foreman's Around the Campfire "Retreat on Population Stabilization"

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There has been a boatload of changes during the past thirty years in the conservation, environmental, and resource movements. Perhaps the most remarkable and deep-rooted shift is that worry and doggedness about explosive human population growth, which was central to all three in the 1960s and 1970s, today is kicked into the corner and shunned like an old, smelly dog. This is a tectonic change. In today's world, population numbers and growth are overlooked as the cause of ecological and social problems—even of the skyrocketing production of greenhouse gases and of the crushing loss of species around the world.

For just one example, some environmentalists in the United States have seized upon suburban and exurban sprawl as a leading cause of habitat loss. But do they mention that a driving factor behind sprawl is population growth, that the United States is the only developed country with third-world population growth rates, and that our growth is mostly driven by immigration? Not that I've heard lately. This head-in-the-sand attitude showed itself in the fall of 2006 when it was announced that the United States now had 300 million people. Environmentalists and conservationists should have been marching in the streets to warn that we must stabilize our population growth immediately. But those who should understand that there are limits to growth largely overlooked this

frightful benchmark. And now, as big legislation on immigration is being thrashed out in the United States, conservationists and environmentalists are nowhere to be seen. Lost in the immigration debate is any mention of population growth and its impact on wild Nature.

How far conservationists and environmentalists have come from what now seem to me to be the Golden Years of the 1960s and 1970s.

If conservationists are going to protect wild Nature, we must ponder deeply and honestly why we've retreated on population. Brutally honestly.

Historian Samuel Hays writes that in the 1970s, "It was rather widely agreed that population growth should be limited." A Gallup poll in 1976 revealed that in North America "84 percent said that they did not want more people in their country and 82 percent not in their community."¹ Today, with tens of millions more in our country, we seem happy to wallow together like hogs in a vast factory farm.

Why the Retreat?

Leon Kolankiewicz and Roy Beck have undertaken the most thorough study of why U.S. environmental and conservation groups have backed off on population issues, in their papers, "The Environmental Movement's Retreat From Advocating U.S. Population Stabilization" and "Forsaking Fundamentals."² William Ryerson, president

¹ Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 1987), 224.

² Roy Beck and Leon Kolankiewicz, "The Environmental Movement's Retreat from Advocating U.S. Population Stabilization (1970-1998): A First Draft of History," and Leon Kolankiewicz and Roy Beck, "Forsaking Fundamentals: The Environmental Establishment Abandons U.S. Population Stabilization," Center for Immigration Studies, April 2001.

of the Population Media Center, looked at how political correctness led to the international retreat on population stabilization in *Wild Earth* in 1998/99.³ These researchers are unsparingly truth seeking in their studies and unafraid of causing a stampede of frothing, red-eyed sacred cows. Kolankiewicz and Beck see five developments as the explanation for the “American environmental movement's retreat from population advocacy”: (1) Dropping Fertility; (2) Anti-Abortion Politics; (3) Emergence of Women's Issues as Priority Concern of Population Groups; (4) Rift Between Conservationists and New-Left Roots; and (5) Immigration Becomes Chief Growth Factor.⁴ In his analysis of how international population stabilization efforts were torpedoed and left to sink, Ryerson emphasizes four factors: how the Reagan Administration dropped U.S. leadership, the decline in U.S. fertility, Catholic opposition to contraception and abortion, and the feminist shift to pronatalism.⁵ I would add to these the general perception among the public and even environmentalists and conservationists that history has shown that Paul Ehrlich was wrong and Julian Simon was right. Yet deeper reasons exist, having to do with human nature. Let's do a quick run through these developments.

Fertility Rate Drop in Wealthy Countries

The population explosion in the United States and other wealthy countries was largely caused by the Baby Boom after World War Two. By 1969, President Nixon warned, “One of the most serious challenges to human destiny in the last third of this

³ William N. Ryerson, “Political Correctness and the Population Problem,” *Wild Earth*, Winter 1998/99, 100-103.

⁴ Kolankiewicz and Beck, “Forsaking Fundamentals,” 3-4.

⁵ Ryerson, “Political Correctness.”

century will be the growth of the population. Whether man's response to that challenge will be a cause for pride or for despair in the year 2000 will depend very much on what we do today.”⁶ Criticize Nixon all you want, but in this he was a great, farsighted statesman, brimming with honesty, and the world’s leaders today are craven cowards and fools, who have failed Nixon’s challenge. And, yes, I often find myself full of despair.

Also in 1969, Stephanie Mills, in her commencement address at Mills College across the bay from San Francisco, proclaimed that “the most humane thing for me to do is to have no children at all.”⁷ Stephanie was thrust into national celebrityhood for her selfless pledge. She was not alone in her sentiments as I and others of our generation made the same decision. Then something amazing happened: “[T]he birth rate in the United States dropped dramatically....By 1973, the fertility rate had fallen to replacement level.”⁸ Many people in the United States and other rich countries believed the population problem was over. Even many environmentalists and conservationists so believed, at least to the extent of moving population to the back burner.

Anti-Abortion Politics

The Catholic Church necessarily rejected the problem of population growth because of their twisted dogma against contraception. With the Supreme Court's Roe vs. Wade decision in 1973 effectively legalizing abortion, the Catholic Church added the outrage against “baby killing” to their opposition to family planning and to dealing with overpopulation. The Catholics joined with their erstwhile foes, fundamentalist

⁶ Kolankiewicz and Beck, “Forsaking Fundamentals,” 12.

⁷ Stephanie Mills, *Whatever Happened To Ecology?* (Sierra Club Books, San Francisco, 1989), 51.

⁸ Ryerson, “Political Correctness,” 101.

Protestants, in an antiabortion alliance that helped to create the modern authoritarian right. Ryerson writes, “Recognizing that concern with population growth was one of the reasons many people supported legalized abortion, the Right to Life movement evolved a strategy to cast doubt on the existence of a population problem.” It was their influence on Ronald Reagan that caused him to end the leading international role of the United States on population stabilization at the 1984 UN population conference in Mexico City.⁹

Emergence of Women's Issues as Priority Concern of Population Groups

By the third UN population conference in Cairo in 1994, a shift had been made from a concern about population growth to a campaign for the empowerment of women. Feminist and human-rights groups played a big role in this shift. Kolankiewicz and Beck write, “Now centered in a feminist rather than environmental mission, many population, family planning, and women's groups would support no talk of stopping growth or reducing average family size because that implied restrictions on what they considered a universal right of women to choose their number of children entirely free of the merest hint of official or informal pressure.”¹⁰

Schism between the Conservationist and New-Left Roots of the Movement

Just like the right, the (Marxist) left is often at odds with Nature conservation. Population matters are one of the flash points. During the Earth-Day era, socialist environmentalist Barry Commoner adamantly denied that population growth caused any “environmental” problems. Most environmental and conservation groups brushed aside

⁹ Ryerson, “Political Correctness,” 102.

¹⁰ Kolankiewicz and Beck, “Forsaking Fundamentals,” 21.

the leftist position on population, but the left bided its time. They believed that conservative conservationists “hi-jacked Earth Day” with population concerns and thereby weakened the environmental movement. In the 1998 Sierra Club election battle on immigration limits, the far-left cavalry regrouped and rode to the rescue in the form of the radical Political Ecology Group (PEG) to defeat the immigration initiative.¹¹

Immigration Became the Chief Cause of U.S. Growth

Kolankiewicz and Beck point out, “When most Americans began to focus on U.S. growth in the 1960s, immigration was an almost insignificant fraction of growth....At the very time that American fertility fell to a level that would have allowed population stabilization within a matter of decades, immigration levels were rising rapidly....By the end of the 1990s, immigrants and their offspring were contributing nearly 70 percent of U.S. population growth.”¹² They further explain, “If immigration and immigrant fertility had been at replacement level rates since 1972—as has native-born fertility—the United States would never have grown above 250 million. Instead, U.S. population passed 273 million before the turn of the century. And the Census Bureau projects that current immigration and immigrant fertility are powerful enough to contribute to the United States surpassing 400 million soon after the year 2050....”¹³ Former Colorado governor

¹¹ Dave Foreman, “Progressive Cornucopianism,” *Wild Earth*, Winter 1997/98, 1-5; Kolankiewicz and Beck, “Forsaking Fundamentals,” 25-27.

¹² Kolankiewicz and Beck, “Forsaking Fundamentals,” 28.

¹³ Kolankiewicz and Beck, “Forsaking Fundamentals,” 29.

Richard Lamm simply asks, “Given present realities, why do we want our children to face an America of 400 million people?”¹⁴

Here is where things get nasty. Because immigration is the main cause of population growth in the United States, the mob mentality of political correctness prevents any calm, rational discussion of population issues in this country. Merely acknowledging that immigration causes population growth is almost guaranteed to get one accused of racism. This only became so in the 1990s. For example, in 1989 the Sierra Club's position was that “immigration to the U.S. should be no greater than that which will permit achievement of population stabilization in the U.S.”¹⁵

Kolankiewicz and Beck see several ways how immigration played a role in the retreat. For one thing, the self-identification of most environmental and conservation groups with progressivism makes them fear the possibility of alienating progressive allies and self-appointed leaders of ethnic-advocacy groups by recognizing immigration's consequences. Moreover, as some of the environmental and conservation funding community was taken over by social activists, foundations increasingly tended not to fund groups that discussed immigration. Don Weeden, executive director of the Weeden Foundation, finds it impossible to get the Environmental Grantmakers Association to even discuss population growth and its causes today.

Although the growthmongers of the *Wall Street Journal* ecstasy have had great influence on turning the general public away from worry about population growth, it has been the politically correct bludgeoning by leftist inquisitors of Paul and Anne Ehrlich,

¹⁴ Richard D. Lamm, “The real bind is too many people everywhere,” *High Country News*, September 5, 1994.

¹⁵ Sierra Club Population Report, Spring 1989.

the late Garret Hardin, Dick Lamm, and other population stabilization advocates that has undercut real population programs among conservation and environmental organizations. Many good liberals like Wisconsin Secretary of State Doug LaFollette and former Senator Gaylord Nelson recognize the threat of overpopulation and have long worked for population stabilization, but the politically correct crowd has done everything they can to undercut stabilization efforts. Nelson's death in 2005 removed his unimpeachable voice from the debate in “The Environmental Movement.”

Ehrlich vs. Simon. Simon Wins!

Because the Hollywood-horror scenarios of mass famine leading to world war in the *Population Bomb* and other doomsday population books have not happened (yet!), people assume that growth isn't a problem. Indeed, I think most engaged Americans generally believe that Julian Simon's rosy predictions of the future triumphed over Paul Ehrlich's gloomy scenarios, even if they don't know their names. Now the hysterics are coming from those who worry about population decline—the birth-dearth pundits. The supposed failure of Ehrlich's “predictions” moved the minds not only of right-wing economists and get-stuff hustlers, it affected—to a degree I haven't truly appreciated until very recently—the thinking of conservationists and environmentalists. For them these beliefs are subtle and possibly even unconscious, but they lead many environmentalists and conservationists to downplay population growth as a problem. (I will deconstruct the popular view that Ehrlich was wrong around a forthcoming Campfire.)

Human Nature

We need to go deeper than the historical occurrences discussed above in plumbing the retreat on population. Perhaps we are even asking the wrong question: Why have society at large and the environmental and conservation movements retreated from forthright concern and action over population growth? The real question to ask instead may be: Why did people for a brief period between the end of World War Two and the mid-1970s become worried about population growth? In other words, maybe the lackadaisical attitude of today is the norm and the worried days of the population movement the aberration. Although social science orthodoxy causes most to discount the role of human nature, I think that is another place where conservationists must look to understand the carefree way in which we view population growth today. There are very deep aspects of human nature, some going back millions of years, that cause us to celebrate rather than bemoan population growth.

First of all, we love babies. Of course we do. If we didn't love babies we wouldn't be here. Our desire to reproduce and our compulsion to defend our offspring are evolutionarily essential. Deciding not to have babies as my wife and I have done is weird, from a Darwinian perspective.

We also have to face up to that old devil, tribalism. We humans and our ancestors have been warlike and genocidal with nearby groups of our kinds at least since our common ancestor with chimpanzees five or more million years ago. In the age-old struggle for *lebensraum* and resources, one's own tribe needed to be more powerful than the surrounding tribes. A brute path for being more powerful than your neighbors was to have a larger population—particularly of throwaway young-male spear-chuckers. We

see this tribal desire for population superiority playing out in ethnic conflicts the world over today.

Simon also carries the day against Ehrlich because he offers an optimistic message against a depressing message. Optimism may well be part of human nature. Cornucopians dismiss prudent views as a social pathology. David Ehrenfeld responds, “The motive for their constant insistence on being optimistic and ‘positive’ is simply the converse of this; optimism is necessary for those who are attempting the impossible; they could not continue to function without it.”¹⁶ Were they to face the void before us, they would lose their will to live. They would have to confront their madness. This they know. To keep the horror from their minds, they damn the truth tellers.

It is also clear from psychological experiments and simple observation that nearly all humans are very shortsighted and cannot plan for the long term. Because the dark scenarios from Ehrlich and other doom-and-gloomers did not happen by 1980 or 2000, well, they were obviously wrong.

So. With some understanding of why conservationists and environmentalists have back-scurried from population matters, what do we do? A crucial step is for conservationists, who still know deep down that population growth is the bedrock cause of the extinction crisis and the erosion of wild Nature, to get in touch with one another. Together, we can recreate conservation-based arguments and a campaign for population stabilization. I am currently working on this with a few other prominent conservationists as the Conservation Leaders’ Forum (CLF), and will announce in a future “Around the Campfire” when the Overpopulation and Biodiversity page is up on the Rewilding

¹⁶ David Ehrenfeld, *The Arrogance of Humanism* (Oxford University Press, NY, 1978), 235.

Website and when the separate (but linked) CLF website is up. For now, if you are interested in this campaign, drop me an email message, and forward this issue of Around the Campfire to friends and colleagues who might be interested.

Dave Foreman

Big Cat Pass, New Mexico

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Adapted and condensed from my forthcoming book *Take Back Conservation*

Thanks to everyone who contributed to the Northern Jaguar Project after my last Campfire. You helped buy a lot of acres for Spot!

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