

ISSUE



Is Limiting Population Growth a Key Factor in Protecting the Global Environment?

YES: Paul Harrison, from "Sex and the Single Planet: Need, Greed, and Earthly Limits," *The Amicus Journal* (Winter 1994)

NO: Betsy Hartmann, from "Population Fictions: The Malthusians Are Back in Town," *Dollars and Sense* (September/October 1994)

ISSUE SUMMARY

YES: Author and Population Institute medal winner Paul Harrison argues for family planning programs that take into account women's rights and socioeconomic concerns in order to prevent world population from exceeding carrying capacity.

NO: Betsy Hartmann, director of the Hampshire College Population and Development Program, counters that the "real problem is not human *numbers* but undemocratic human *systems* of labor and resource exploitation, often backed by military repression."

The debate about whether human population growth is a fundamental cause of ecological problems and whether population control should be a central strategy in protecting the environment has long historical roots.

Those who are seriously concerned about uncontrolled human population growth are often referred to as "Malthusians" after the English parson Thomas Malthus, whose "Essay on the Principle of Population" was first published in 1798. Malthus warned that the human race was doomed because geometric population increases would inexorably outstrip productive capacity, leading to famine and poverty. His predictions were undermined by technological improvements in agriculture and the widespread use of birth control (rejected by Malthus on moral grounds), which brought the rate of population growth in industrialized countries under control during the twentieth century.

The theory of the demographic transition was developed to explain why Malthus's dire predictions had not come true. This theory proposes that the

first effect of economic development is to lower death rates. This causes a population boom, but stability is again achieved as economic and social changes lead to lower birth rates. This pattern has indeed been followed in Europe, the United States, Canada, and Japan. The less-developed countries have more recently experienced rapidly falling death rates. Thus far, the economic and social changes needed to bring down birth rates have not occurred, and many countries in Asia and Latin America suffer from exponential population growth. This fact has given rise to a group of neo-Malthusian theorists who contend that it is unlikely that less-developed countries will undergo the transition to lower birth rates required to avoid catastrophe due to overpopulation.

Biologist Paul Ehrlich's best-seller *The Population Bomb* (Ballantine Books, 1968) popularized his view that population growth in both the developed and developing world must be halted to avert worldwide ecological disaster. Ecologist Garrett Hardin extended the neo-Malthusian argument by proposing that some less-developed nations have gone so far down the road of population-induced resource scarcity that they are beyond salvation and should be allowed to perish rather than possibly sink the remaining world economies.

Barry Commoner, a prominent early critic of the neo-Malthusian perspective, argues in *The Closing Circle* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1971) and his subsequent popular books and articles that inappropriate technology is the principal cause of local and global environmental degradation. While not denying that population growth is a contributing factor, he favors promoting ecologically sound development rather than population-control strategies that ignore socioeconomic realities.

Enthusiasts for population control as a sociopolitical and environmental strategy have always been opposed by religious leaders whose creeds reject any overt means of birth control. Recently, the traditional population control policy planners have also been confronted with charges of sexism and paternalism by women's groups, minority groups, and representatives of developing nations who argue that the needs and interests of their constituencies have been ignored by the primarily white, male policy planners of the developed world. At the September 1994 World Population Conference in Cairo, organizers and spokespeople for these interests succeeded in promoting policy statements that reflected sensitivity to many of their concerns.

In the following selections, Paul Harrison argues that "population growth combined with... consumption and technology damages the environment." He proposes "quality family planning and reproductive health services, mother and child health care, women's rights and women's education" as a four-point program to rapidly decrease population growth. Betsy Hartmann asserts that "the threat to livelihoods, democracy and the environment posed by the fertility of poor women hardly compares to that posed by the consumption patterns of the rich or the ravages of militaries." She proposes greater democratic control over resources rather than narrow population control as an environmental strategy.

Paul Harrison



Sex and the Single Planet: Need, Greed, and Earthly Limits

Population touches on sex, gender, parenthood, religion, politics—all the deepest aspects of our humanity. Start a debate on the topic, and the temperature quickly warms up. In the preparations for next year's World Population Conference in Cairo, the link between population growth and environmental damage is one of the hottest topics.

The sheer numbers involved today make it hard to ignore the link. The last forty years saw the fastest rise in human numbers in all previous history, from only 2.5 billion people in 1950 to 5.6 billion today. This same period saw natural habitats shrinking and species dying at an accelerating rate. The ozone hole appeared, and the threat of global warming emerged.

Worse is in store. Each year in the 1980s saw an extra 85 million people on earth. The second half of the 1990s will add an additional 94 million people per year. That is equivalent to a new United States every thirty-three months, another Britain every seven months, a Washington every six days. A whole earth of 1800 was added in just one decade, according to United Nations Population Division statistics. After 2000, annual additions will slow, but by 2050 the United Nations expects the human race to total just over 10 billion—an extra earth of 1980 on top of today's, according to U.N. projections.

If population growth does not cause or aggravate environmental problems, as many feminists, socialists, and economists claim, then we do not need to worry about these numbers. If it does, then the problems of the last decade may be only a foretaste of what is to come.

At the local level, links between growing population densities and land degradation are becoming clearer in some cases. Take the case of Madagascar. Madagascar's forests have been reduced to a narrowing strip along the eastern escarpment. Of the original forest cover of 27.6 million acres, only 18.8 million acres remained in 1950. Today this has been halved to 9.4 million acres—which means that habitat for the island's unique wildlife has been halved in just forty years. Every year some 3 percent of the remaining forest is cleared, almost all of that to provide land for populations expanding at 3.2 percent a year.

From Paul Harrison, "Sex and the Single Planet: Need, Greed, and Earthly Limits," *The Amicus Journal* (Winter 1994). Copyright © 1994 by *The Amicus Journal*, a quarterly publication of The Natural Resources Defense Council, 40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011. Reprinted by permission. NRDC membership dues or nonmember subscriptions: \$10 annually.

The story of one village, Ambodiaviavy, near Ranomafana, shows the process at work. Fifty years ago, the whole area was dense forest. Eight families, thirty-two people in all, came here in 1947, after French colonials burned down their old village. At first they farmed only the valley bottoms, which they easily irrigated from the stream running down from the hilltops. There was no shortage of land. Each family took as much as they were capable of working. During the course of the next forty-three years, the village population swelled ten times over, to 320, and the number of families grew to thirty-six. Natural growth was supplemented by immigration from the overcrowded plateaus, where all cultivable land is occupied. By the 1950s, the valley bottom lands had filled up completely. New couples started to clear forest on the sloping valley sides. They moved gradually uphill; today, they are two-thirds of the way to the hilltops.

Villager Zafindraibe's small paddy field feeds his family of five for only four months of the year. In 1990 he felled and burned five acres of steep forest land to plant hill rice. The next year cassava would take over. After that the plot should be left fallow for at least six or seven years.

Now population growth is forcing farmers to cut back the fallow cycle. As land shortage increases, a growing number of families can no longer afford to leave the hillsides fallow long enough to restore their fertility. They return more and more often. Each year it is cultivated, the hillside plot loses more topsoil, organic matter, nutrients.



The debate over this link between population growth and the environment has raged back and forth since 1798. In that year Thomas Malthus, in his notorious *Essay on Population*, suggested that population tended to grow faster than the food supply. Human numbers would always be checked by famine and mortality.

Socialists from William Cobbett to Karl Marx attacked Malthus's arguments. U.S. land reformer Henry George, in *Progress and Poverty* (1879), argued that the huge U.S. population growth had surged side by side with huge increases in wealth. Poverty, said George, was caused not by overpopulation, but by warfare and unjust laws. Poverty caused population growth, not the other way around.

In modern times, U.S. ecologist Paul Ehrlich has played the Malthus role. "No geological event in a billion years has posed a threat to terrestrial life comparable to that of human overpopulation," he argued back in 1970, urging compulsion if voluntary methods failed. His early extremism (such as suggesting cutting off aid to certain Third World countries) has mellowed into a more balanced analysis (for example, he acknowledges the need for more than just contraceptives to attack the problem). But doomsday rhetoric remains in his 1990 book, *The Population Explosion*, which predicts "many hundreds of millions" of famine deaths if we do not halt human population growth.

Today's anti-Malthusians come in all shades, from far left to far right. For radical writers Susan George and Frances Moore Lappé, poverty and inequality are the root causes of environmental degradation, not population. For Barry

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Commoner the chief threat is misguided technology. Economist Julian Simon sees moderate population growth as no problem at all, but as a tonic for economic growth. More people mean more brains to think up more solutions. "There is no meaningful limit to our capacity to keep growing forever," he wrote in 1981 in *The Ultimate Resource*.

Other voices in the debate focus on ethics and human rights. Orthodox Catholics and fundamentalist Muslims oppose artificial contraception or abortion. A wide range of feminists stress women's rights to choose or refuse and downplay the impact of population growth. "Blaming global environmental degradation on population growth," argued the Global Committee on Women, Population and the Environment before Rio, "stimulates an atmosphere of crisis. It helps lay the groundwork for an intensification of top-down population control programs that are deeply disrespectful of women."

There is no debate quite like this one for sound and fury. As the forgoing examples show, positions are emotional and polarized. Factions pick on one or two elements as the basic problem, and ignore all the others. Thinking proceeds in black-and-white slogans.

Often debaters seem to be locked into the single question: Is population growth a crucial factor in environmental degradation—or not? However, if we frame our inquiry in this simplistic way, only two answers are possible—yes or no—and only two conclusions—obsession with family planning, or opposition to family planning. Both of these positions lead to abuse or neglect of women's rights.

There has to be a way out of this blind alley. Perhaps we can make a start by accepting that *all* the factors mentioned by the rival schools are important. All interact to create the damage. Sometimes one factor is dominant, sometimes another. Population is always there. In some fields it plays the lead role, in others no more than a bit part.

Most observers agree that it is not just population growth that damages the environment. The amount each person consumes matters too, and so does the technology used in production and waste disposal. These three factors work inseparably in every type of damage. Each of them is affected by many other factors, from the status of women to the ownership of land, from the level of democracy to the efficiency of the market. If we adopt this complex, nuanced view, much of the crazy controversy evaporates, and the hard work of measuring impact and designing policy begins.

A number of success stories have emerged. One hallmark of these successes is the recognition that population should be an integral part of long-range resource management.



Take a snapshot at one particular moment, and there is no way of saying which of the three factors carries the main blame for damage. It would be like asking whether brain, bone, or muscle plays the main role in walking. But if we

compare changes over time, we can get an idea of their relative strengths. Results vary a lot, depending on which country or which type of damage we are looking at.

In Madagascar, population growth bears the main blame for deforestation and loss of biodiversity. As described before, the island's rain forests have shrunk to a narrow strip. Increased consumption—a rise in living standards—and technology tend to play less and less of a role in this devastation. Incomes and food intake today are lower than thirty years ago. Farming methods have not changed in centuries.

Population growth is running at 3 percent a year. When technology is stagnant, every extra human means less forest and wildlife.

By contrast, population growth played only a minor role in creating the ozone hole. The main blame lay with rising consumption and technology change. Between 1940 and 1980, world chlorofluorocarbon (CFC) emissions grew at more than 15 percent a year. Almost all of this was in developed countries, where population grew at less than 1 percent a year. So population growth accounted for less than 7 percent (one-fifteenth) of increased CFC emissions.

A central issue in the controversy is whether we are on course to pass the earth's carrying capacity—the maximum population that the environment can support indefinitely. Malthusians like Dennis and Donnella Meadows suggest in their book *Beyond the Limits* that we have already passed the limits in some areas such as alteration of the atmosphere. Anti-Malthusians like Julian Simon insist that we can go on raising the limits through technology.

Here, too, a compromise comes closer to reality. Humans *have* raised the ceiling on growth many times in the past. When hunter-gatherers ran short of wild foods, they turned to farming. When western Europeans started to run out of wood in the seventeenth century, they turned to coal. The process continues today. When one resource runs down, its price changes, and we increase productivity or exploration, bring in substitutes, or reduce use. In other words, we do not just stand by and watch helplessly while the world collapses. We respond and adapt. We change our technology, our consumption patterns, even the number of children we have. It is because we can adapt so fast that we are the dominant species on earth.

So far adaptation has kept us well stocked with minerals despite rising use. It has proved Malthus wrong by raising food production roughly in line with the five-and-a-half-fold growth in population since his time. But it has not worked at all well in maintaining stocks of natural resources like forests, water, sea fish, or biodiversity, nor with preserving the health of sinks for liquid and gaseous wastes such as lakes, oceans, and atmosphere. These are common property resources—no one owns them—so what Garrett Hardin called the “tragedy of the commons” applies. Everyone overuses or abuses the source or sink, fearing that if they hold back others will reap the gains.

Problems like erosion, acid rain, or global warming are not easy to diagnose or cure. Sometimes we do not even know they are happening until they are far advanced, as in the case of the ozone hole. Like cancer, they build up slowly and often pass unseen till things come to a head. Farmers in Burkina Faso did

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not believe their land was eroding away until someone left a ruler stuck into the soil; then they saw that the level had gone down an inch in a year.

Environmental quality follows a U-shaped curve. Things get worse before they get better, on everything from biodiversity and soil erosion to air and water quality. But everything hinges on how long the downswing lasts—and how serious or irreversible are the problems it gives rise to. Given time we will develop institutions to control overfishing or ocean pollution, stop acid rain or halt global warming. But time is the crux of the matter. Adaptable though we are, we rarely act in time to prevent severe damage. In one area after another, from whales to ozone holes, we have let crises happen before taking action.

Over the next few decades we face the risk of irreversible damage on several fronts. If we lose 10 or 20 percent of species, we may never restore that diversity. If the global climate flips, then all our ability to adapt will not stave off disaster. Rather than wait for global crisis, prudence dictates that we should take action now.

However, the way we look at causes deeply affects the search for solutions. That is why the debate on population and environment matters. If we say that damage results only from technology, only from overconsumption, only from injustice, or only from population, we will act on only one element of the equation. But damage results from population, consumption, and technology multiplied together, so we must act on all three. And we cannot neglect the many factors from inequality to women's rights and free markets that influence all others.



Consumption will be the hardest nut to crack. Reducing overconsumption may be good for the soul, but the world's poorest billion must *increase* their consumption to escape poverty. The middle 3 billion will not willingly rein in their ambitions. The middle classes in India and China are already launched on the consumer road that Europe took in the 1950s. They are moving faster down that road, and their consumer class probably outnumbers North America's already. Even in the rich countries, consumption goes on growing at roughly 2 percent a year, with hiccups during recession. Consumption can be cut if consumers and producers have to pay for the damage they do through higher prices or taxes—but, politically, it is not easy. Politicians who threaten to raise taxes risk electoral defeat.

So technological change must reduce the *impact* of consumption. But it will be a Herculean task for technology to do the job alone. The massive oil price rises of 1973 and 1979–80 stimulated big advances in energy efficiency. Between 1973 and 1988 gasoline consumption per mile in western countries fell by 29 percent. But this technology gain was wiped out by a rise in car numbers of 58 percent, due to the combined growth of population and consumption. The result was a rise in gasoline consumption of 17 percent.

Population and consumption will go on raising the hurdles that technology must leap. By 2050, world population will have grown by 80 percent, on the U.N. medium projection. Even at the low 1980s growth rate of 1.2 percent

a year, consumption per person will have doubled. Technology would have to cut the damage done by each unit of consumption by 72 percent, just to keep total damage rising at today's destructive rate.

Yet the International Panel on Climate Change says we ought to *cut* carbon dioxide output by 60 percent from today's levels. If incomes and population grow as above, technology would have to cut the emissions for each unit of consumption by a massive 89 percent by 2050. This would require a 3.8 percent reduction every year for fifty-seven years.

Such a cut is not utterly impossible, but it would demand massive commitment on all sides. Introducing the 85 miles-per-gallon car could deliver a cut of almost exactly this size in the transport sector, if it took ten years to go into mass production, and another fifteen years to saturate the market. But the combined growth of population and car ownership could easily halve the gain.

Technology change will have a far easier job if it is backed by action on the population front. Population efforts are slow-acting at first: for the first fifteen years the difference is slight. The U.N.'s low population projection points to what might be achieved if all countries did their best in bringing birth rates down. Yet for 2010, the low projection for world population is only 1.2 percent less than the medium projection. Over the longer term, though, there are big benefits. By 2025 the low projection is 7.3 percent less than the medium—621 million fewer people, or a whole Europe plus Japan. By 2050 the low figure is 22 percent or 2.206 billion people less—equal to the whole world's population around 1930.

With a concerted effort in all countries (including the United States), world population could peak at 8.5 billion or less in 2050 and, after that, come down. And it is clear that this would reduce environmental impact and lower the hurdles that improved technology will have to leap.

What do we need to do to bring it about? Here, too, the debate rages. Diehard Malthusians talk of the need for crash programs of "population control." Horrified feminists answer that a woman's fertility is her own business, not a target for male policy measures. The objective should be reproductive health and choice, not simply bringing numbers down, they argue.

Yet this conflict, too, is an artificial one. The best way to bring numbers down fast is to pump resources not into crash or compulsory programs narrowly focused on family planning, but into broad women's development programs that most feminists would welcome. How do we get enough resources out of male governments to do this properly? Only by using the arguments about environment and economy that feminists do not allow.

Coercion and crash programs defeat their own aims. "Population control" is impossible without killing people: the term implies coercion and should be dropped forthwith. Coercion rouses protests that sooner or later bring it to an end. India's brief and brutal experiment with forced sterilization in 1975-76 led within a year to the fall of Indira Gandhi's government. The progress of family planning in India was set back a decade.

Mass saturation with just one or two family planning methods is equally doomed to failure. With female contraceptives, side-effects are common: women need good advice and medical backup to deal with them or avoid

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them. Left to handle them alone, they will stop using contraceptives and go on having five children each. Once mistrust has been aroused, it will make the job harder even when better programs are finally brought in.

If we want to bring population growth rates down rapidly, we must learn from the real success stories like Thailand. In the early 1960s, the average Thai woman was having 6.4 children. Today she is having only 2.2. This represents a drop of 3.5 percent per year—as speedy as the fastest change in technology.

Such success was achieved, without a whiff of coercion, by universal access to a wide and free choice of family planning methods, with good-quality advice and medical backup. Mother and child health was improved, women's rights were advanced, and female education leveled up with male.

All these measures are worthwhile in their own right. They improve the quality of life for women and men alike. And there are economic spin-offs. Thai incomes grew at 6 percent a year in the 1980s. A healthy and educated work force attracts foreign investment and can compete in the modern high-tech world.

Quality family planning and reproductive health services, mother and child health, women's rights, and women's education—this four-point program is the best way to achieve a rapid slowdown in population growth. It can improve the quality of life directly, through health and education benefits, and it improves the status of women. It creates a healthy and educated work force. It gives people the knowledge with which they can fight for their own rights. It might also help to raise incomes, and it will certainly help to slow environmental damage.

With its human, economic, and environmental benefits, there are few programs that will offer better value for money over the coming decades.



NO 

Betsy Hartmann

Population Fictions: The Malthusians Are Back in Town

In the corridors of power, the tailors are back at work, stitching yet another invisible robe to fool the emperor and the people. After 12 years in which the Reagan and Bush administrations downplayed population control as a major aim of U.S. foreign policy, the Clinton administration is playing catch-up. World attention will focus on the issue this month in Cairo, when leaders from the United States and abroad gather at the United Nations' third International Conference on Population and Development. Cloaked in the rhetoric of environmentalism and—ironically—women's rights, population control is back in vogue.

At the UN's second International Conference on Population in Mexico City in 1984, the Reagan administration asserted that rapid population growth is a "neutral phenomenon" that becomes a problem only when the free market is subverted by "too much governmental control of economies." Under the Republicans, the U.S. withdrew funding from any international family planning agencies that perform abortions or even counsel women about them. Aid was cut off to the International Planned Parenthood Foundation as well as the UN Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA).

The Clinton administration, by contrast, is requesting \$585 million for population programs in fiscal year 1995, up from \$502 million the year before. This aid is channelled through the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), which has made population control a central element of its new "Sustainable Development" mission for the post Cold War era. The USAID's draft strategy paper of October 1993 identifies rapid population growth as a key "strategic threat" which "consumes all other economic gains, drives environmental damage, exacerbates poverty, and impedes "democratic governance."

Clinton's more liberal stand on abortion is certainly welcome, but even that has yet to translate into effective Congressional action or foreign policy. Announced in April, USAID's new policy on abortion funding overseas is still very restrictive: It will finance abortion only in cases of rape, incest, and life endangerment, the same conditions the Hyde amendment puts on federal Medicaid funds. Along with the mainstream environmental movement, the administration pays lip service to women's rights but continues to back practices

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—such as promoting long-acting contraceptive methods like Norplant without follow-up medical care—that are actually harmful to women’s health.

Population Myths

It is true that population growth (which is actually slowing in most areas of the world) can put additional pressure on resources in specific regions. But the threat to livelihoods, democracy and the global environment posed by the fertility of poor women is hardly comparable to that posed by the consumption patterns of the rich or the ravages of militaries.

The industrialized nations, home to 22% of the world’s population, consume 60% of the world’s food, 70% of its energy, 75% of its metals, and 85% of its wood. They generate almost three-quarters of all carbon dioxide emissions, which in turn comprise nearly half of the manmade greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, and are responsible for most of the ozone depletion. Militaries are the other big offenders. The German Research Institute for Peace Policy estimates that one-fifth of all global environmental degradation is due to military activities. The U.S. military is the largest domestic oil consumer and generates more toxic waste than the five largest multinational chemical companies combined.

What about the environmental degradation that occurs within developing countries? The UNFPA’s *State of World Population 1992* boldly claims that population growth “is responsible for around 79% of deforestation, 72% of arable land expansion, and 69% of growth in livestock numbers.” Elsewhere it maintains that the “bottom billion,” the very poorest people in developing countries, “often impose greater environmental injury than the other 3 billion of their citizens put together.”

Blaming such a large proportion of environmental degradation on the world’s poorest people is untenable, scientifically and ethically. It is no secret that in Latin America the extension of cattle ranching—mainly for export, not domestic consumption—has been the primary impetus behind deforestation. And it is rich people who own the ranches, not the poor, as most countries in Latin America have a highly inequitable distribution of land. In Southeast Asia the main culprit is commercial logging, again mainly for export.

In developing countries, according to USAID, rapid population growth also “renders inadequate or obsolete any investment in schools, housing, food production capacity and infrastructure.” But are increasing numbers of poor people really the main drain on national budgets? The UN’s 1993 *Human Development Report* estimates that developing countries spend only one-tenth of their national budgets on human development priorities. Their military expenditures meanwhile soared from 91% of combined health and education expenditures in 1977 to 169% in 1990. And in any case, the social spending that there is often flows to the rich. A disproportionate share of health budgets frequently goes to expensive hospital services in urban areas rather than to primary care for the poor, and educational resources are often devoted to schools for the sons and daughters of the wealthy.

The “structural adjustment” programs imposed by the World Bank have not helped matters, forcing Third World countries to slash social spending in order to service external debts. The burden of growing inequality has fallen disproportionately on women, children, and minorities who have borne the brunt of structural adjustment policies in reduced access to food, health care and education. But in USAID’s view, population growth is at the root of their misery: “As expanding populations demand an even greater number of jobs, a climate is created where workers, especially women and minorities, are oppressed.”

A Costly Consensus

In the collective psyche of the national security establishment, population growth is now becoming a great scapegoat and enemy, a substitute for the Evil Empire. A 1992 study by the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace warned that population growth threatens “international stability” and called for “a multilateral effort to drastically expand family planning services.” A widely cited February 1993 *Scientific American* article by Thomas Homer-Dixon, Jeffrey Boutwell and George Rathjens identifies rapidly expanding populations as a major factor in growing resource scarcities that are “contributing to violent conflicts in many parts of the developing world.”

In the pages of respectable journals, racist metaphors are acceptable again, as the concept of noble savage gives way to post-modern barbarian. In an *Atlantic Monthly* article on the “coming anarchy” caused by population growth and resource depletion, Robert Kaplan likens poor West African children to ants. Their older brothers and fathers (and poor, nonwhite males in general) are “re-primitivized” men who find liberation in violence, since their natural aggression has not been “tranquilized” by the civilizing influences of the Western Enlightenment and middle-class existence.

The scaremongering of security analysts is complemented by the population propaganda of mainstream environmental organizations. U.S. environmentalism has long had a strong neo-Malthusian wing which views Man as the inevitable enemy of Nature. The Sierra Club backed Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich’s 1968 tract *The Population Bomb*, which featured lurid predictions of impending famine and supported compulsory sterilization in India as “coercion in a good cause.”

By the late 1980s, population growth had transformed from just one of several preoccupations of the mainstream environmental movement into an intense passion. Groups such as the National Wildlife Federation and the National Audubon Society beefed up their population programs, hoping to attract new membership. Meanwhile, population lobbyists such as the influential Population Crisis Committee (renamed Population Action International) seized on environmental concerns as a new rationale for their existence.

The marriage of convenience between the population and environment establishments led to many joint efforts in advance of the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro. In 1990, Audubon, National Wildlife, Sierra Club, Planned Parenthood Federation of America, and the Population Crisis Committee began a joint Campaign on Population and

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the Environment. Its major objective was “to expand public awareness of the link between population growth, environmental degradation and the resulting human suffering.”

Despite their efforts, the U.S. population/environment lobby had a rude awakening at Rio. In the formal intergovernmental negotiations, many developing nations refused to put population on the UNCED agenda, claiming it would divert attention from the North’s responsibility for the environmental crisis. At the same time the nongovernmental Women’s Action Agenda 21, endorsed by 1500 women activists from around the world, condemned suggestions that women’s fertility rates were to blame for environmental degradation.

In the aftermath of Rio, “the woman question” has forced the population/environment lobby to amend its strategy. Many organizations are emphasizing women’s rights in their preparations for the Cairo conference. Women’s empowerment—through literacy programs, job opportunities, and access to health care and family planning—is now seen as a prerequisite for the reduction of population growth.

While this is a step forward, the population/environment lobby largely treats the protection of women’s rights as a means to population reduction, rather than as a worthy pursuit in itself. Its inclusion—and co-optation—of feminist concerns is part of a larger strategy to create a broad population control “consensus” among the American public. Behind this effort is a small group of powerful actors: the Pew Charitable Trusts Global Stewardship Initiative; the U.S. State Department through the office of Timothy Wirth, Undersecretary for Global Affairs; the UNFPA; and Ted Turner of the powerful Turner Broadcasting System, producer of CNN.

Although the Pew Initiative’s “White Paper” lists “population growth and unsustainable patterns of consumption” as its two targets, population growth is by far its main concern. Among Pew’s explicit goals are to “forge consensus and to increase public understanding of, and commitment to act on, population and consumption challenges.” Its targeted constituencies in the United States are environmental organizations, religious communities, and international affairs and foreign policy specialists.

Pew and the Turner Foundation have sponsored “high visibility” town meetings on population around the country, featuring Ted Turner’s wife Jane Fonda, who is also UNFPA’s “Goodwill Ambassador.” At the Atlanta meeting, covered on Turner’s CNN, Fonda attributed the collapse of two ancient Native American communities to overpopulation.

To prepare for the Cairo conference, the Pew Initiative hired three opinion research firms to gauge public understanding of the connections between population, environment and consumption so as to “mobilize Americans” on these issues. The researchers found that the public generally did not feel strongly about population growth or see it as a “personal threat.” Their conclusion: An “emotional component” is needed to kindle population fears. Those interviewed complained that they had already been overexposed to “images of stark misery, such as starving children.” Although the study notes that these images may in fact “work,” it recommends finding “more current, targeted visual devices.” One strategy is to build on people’s pessimism about the future:

“For women, particularly, relating the problems of excess population growth to children’s future offers possibilities.”

Sacrificed Rights

Whatever nods the new “consensus” makes towards women’s broader rights and needs, family planning is its highest priority. USAID views family planning as “the single most effective means” of reducing population growth; it intends to provide “birth control to every woman in the developing world who wants it by the end of the decade.”

The promotion of female contraception as the technical fix for the “population problem” ignores male responsibility for birth-control and undermines the quality of health and family planning services. The overriding objective is to drive down the birth rate as quickly and cheaply as possible, rather than to address people’s broader health needs.

In Bangladesh, for example, at least one-third of the health budget is devoted to population control. The principal means is poor-quality female sterilization with incentives for those who undergo the procedure, including cash payments for “wages lost” and transportation costs, as well as a piece of clothing (justified as “surgical apparel”). The World Bank and population specialists are now heralding Bangladesh as a great family planning success story. But at what human cost? Because of the health system’s nearly exclusive emphasis on population control, most Bangladeshis have little or no access to primary health care, and infant and maternal death rates remain at tragically high levels.

Lowering the birth rate by itself has hardly solved the country’s problems. Poverty in Bangladesh has much more to do with inequitable land ownership and the urban elite’s stranglehold over external resources, including foreign aid, than it does with numbers of people. The great irony is that many people in Bangladesh wanted birth control well before the aggressive and often coercive sterilization campaign launched by the government with the help of the World Bank and AID. A truly voluntary family planning program, as part of more comprehensive health services, would have yielded similar demographic results, without deepening human suffering.

The prejudice against basic health care is also reflected in the UN’s first draft of the “Program of Action” for the Cairo conference. It asks the international community to spend \$10.2 billion on population and family planning by the year 2000, and only \$1.2 billion on broader reproductive health services such as maternity care. After pressure from women’s groups and more progressive governments, the UN raised this figure to \$5 billion, but family planning still has a two-to-one advantage. Meanwhile, the Vatican is attacking women’s rights by bracketing for further negotiation any language in the Cairo document which refers to abortion, contraception or sexuality. Women are caught between a rock and a hard place, bracketed by the Vatican, and targeted by the population establishment.

The current focus of population programs is on the introduction of long-acting, provider-dependent contraceptive technologies. The hormonal implant Norplant, for example, which is inserted in a woman’s arm, is effective for five

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years and can only be removed by trained medical personnel. But often, these methods are administered in health systems that are ill-equipped to distribute them safely or ethically; In population programs in Indonesia, Bangladesh and Egypt, researchers have documented many instances of women being denied access to Norplant removal, as well as receiving inadequate counselling, screening, and follow-up care.

A number of new contraceptives in the pipeline pose even more serious problems, in terms of both health risks and the potential for abuse at the hands of zealous population control officials. The non-surgical quinacrine sterilization pellet, which drug specialists suspect may be linked to cancer, can be administered surreptitiously (it was given to Vietnamese women during IUD checks without their knowledge in 1993). Also potentially dangerous are vaccines which immunize women against reproductive hormones. Their long-term reversibility has not yet been tested, and the World Health Organization has expressed some concern about the drugs' interaction with the immune system, especially in people infected with the AIDS virus. Simpler barrier methods, such as condoms and diaphragms, which also protect against sexually transmitted diseases, continue to receive considerably less attention and resources in population programs since they are viewed as less effective in preventing births.

Recently, a network of women formed a caucus on gender issues in order to pressure USAID to live up to its rhetoric about meeting women's broader reproductive health needs. The caucus emerged in the wake of a controversial USAID decision to award a \$9 million contract for studying the impact of family planning on women's lives to Family Health International, a North-Carolina-based population agency, rather than to women's organizations with more diverse and critical perspectives.

Progressive environmentalists also intend to monitor USAID's planned initiative to involve Third World environmental groups in building "grass roots awareness around the issue of population and family planning." They fear that USAID funds will be used to steer these groups away from addressing the politically sensitive root causes of environmental degradation—such as land concentration, and corporate logging and ranching—toward a narrow population control agenda.

Trouble at Home

Within the United States, the toughest battle will be challenging the multi-million dollar public opinion "consensus" manufactured by Pew, the State Department, and CNN. Not only does this consensus promote heightened U.S. involvement in population control overseas, but by targeting women's fertility, it helps lay the ground, intentionally or not, for similar domestic efforts.

The Clinton administration is considering whether to endorse state policies that deny additional cash benefits to women who have babies while on welfare. (This despite the fact that women on welfare have only two children on average.) A number of population and environment groups are also fomenting dangerous resentment against immigrant women. The Washington-based

Carrying Capacity Network, for example, states that the United States has every right to impose stricter immigration controls “as increasing numbers of women from Mexico, China and other areas of the world come to the United States for the purpose of giving birth on U.S. soil.” And in many circles, Norplant is touted as the wonder drug which will cure the epidemic of crime and poverty allegedly caused by illegitimacy.

Such simple solutions to complex social problems not only don’t work, they often breed misogyny and racism, and they prevent positive public action on finding real solutions. Curbing industrial and military pollution, for example, will do far more to solve the environmental crisis than controlling the wombs of poor women who, after all, exert the least pressure on global resources.

The real problem is not human *numbers* but undemocratic human systems of labor and resource exploitation, often backed by military repression. We need to rethink the whole notion of “carrying capacity”—are we really pressing up against the earth’s limits because there are too many of us? It would make more sense to talk about “political carrying capacity,” defined as the limited capacity of the environment and economy to sustain inequality and injustice. Viewed this way, the solution to environmental degradation and economic decline lies in greater democratic control over resources, not in a narrow population control agenda.





POSTSCRIPT

Is Limiting Population Growth a Key Factor in Protecting the Global Environment?

Harrison extols the virtues of Thailand's population-control program, which he claims has achieved success in significantly reducing birthrates without coercion while promoting women's health care and female education. He implies that this policy has contributed to a growth in average income and the ability to "compete in the modern high-tech world." He does not, however, respond to Hartmann's argument that such policies alone do not ensure a reduction in environmental degradation.

Anyone with a serious interest in environmental issues should certainly read Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* (Ballantine Books, 1968) and Barry Commoner's *The Closing Circle* (Alfred A. Knopf, 1971). Ehrlich was so distressed by the arguments contained in Commoner's popular book that he coauthored a detailed critique with environmental scientist John P. Holden, which Commoner answered with a lengthy response. These two no-holds-barred pieces were published as a "Dialogue" in the May 1972 issue of the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*. They are interesting reading not only for their technical content but also as a rare example of respected scientists airing their professional and personal antagonisms in public.

Another frequently cited, controversial essay in support of the neo-Malthusian analysis is "The Tragedy of the Commons," by Garrett Hardin, which first appeared in the December 13, 1968, issue of *Science*. For a thorough attempt to justify his authoritarian response to the world population problem, see Hardin's book *Exploring New Ethics for Survival* (Viking Press, 1972).

An economic and political analyst who is concerned about the connections among population growth, resource depletion, and pollution—but who rejects Hardin's proposed solutions—is Lester Brown, director of the Worldwatch Institute. His worldview is detailed in *The Twenty-Ninth Day* (W. W. Norton, 1978). Anthropologist J. Kenneth Smail argues that we have already exceeded the carrying capacity of the planet and need to reduce the world's population in "Beyond Population Stabilization: The Case for Dramatically Reducing Global Human Numbers," *Politics and the Life Sciences* (September 1997).

Anyone willing to entertain the propositions that pollution has not been increasing, natural resources are not becoming scarce, the world food situation is improving, and population growth is actually beneficial might find the late economist Julian Simon's *The Ultimate Resource* (Princeton University Press, 1982) amusing, if not convincing.

For an assessment of needs and strategies to control population growth by several international authorities, including Commoner, see "A Forum: How Big Is the Population Factor?" in the July/August 1990 issue of *EPA Journal*. Ehrlich's present views, which have been somewhat modified in response to criticism by feminists and people from less-developed countries, are presented in an article that he coauthored with Anne Ehrlich and Gretchen Daily in the September/October 1995 issue of *Mother Jones*. A series of articles on the connections among population, development, and environmental degradation are included in the February 1992 issue of *Ambio*.

Harrison's essay is part of a special section entitled "Population, Consumption and Environment" in the Winter 1994 issue of *The Amicus Journal*, which includes other articles focusing on the needs and concerns of people of less-developed countries, along with brief statements representing the views of people from all over the world about the issues that were to be debated at the 1994 Cairo population conference. The Spring 1994 issue of that journal includes an essay by Jodi L. Jacobson that addresses some of the same concerns raised by Hartmann. Distinguished environmentalist Michael Brower addresses the population debate in the Fall 1994 issue of *Nucleus*, the magazine of the Union of Concerned Scientists. A provocative response to the Cairo meeting is the article by Norway's prime minister and sustainable development advocate Gro Harlem Brundtland in the December 1994 issue of *Environment*. Gita Sen, in "The World Programme of Action: A New Paradigm for Population Policy," *Environment* (January/February 1995), describes and analyzes the World Programme of Action, which is the main working document emanating from the Cairo conference. Robin Morgan, in "Dispatch from Beijing," *Ms.* (January/February 1996), reports on the follow-up UN Fourth World Conference on Women, which was held in Beijing in 1995.

In her book *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs: The Global Politics of Population Control*, rev. ed. (South End Press, 1995), Hartmann offers a radical critique of the extent to which the women's rights movement has accepted the politics and rhetoric of what she refers to as the "population establishment."

