

OVERPOPULATION: THE ULTIMATE EXPLOITER

An NPG Forum Paper

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INTRODUCTION

All are welcome and all are invited – especially those who care about leaving the world in better shape than we found it. Every problem is affected by this great exploiter. Overpopulation diminishes our resources, landscapes, water supply, and the ability of our climate to regulate itself. Our poor and disenfranchised are overwhelmed by this issue, as it swims in ridiculous taboos.

Overpopulation stares us in the face, it glares at us from every shocking news story – but few dare to say its name. They prefer instead to work on the problems it creates, what I refer to as “downstream issues.” It’s so much easier to kick the very notion of overpopulation down the road and put it on the next generation’s plate – or assume that the handful of population groups can do it by themselves.

In today’s political and cultural discourse, it is deemed more politically correct to focus on all troublesome issues *except the one that could truly permit success*. Overpopulation has become the great taboo – both because some deliberately hid it under the rug, and because others let them get away with it. That has to stop, but only if we want to be successful in our downstream activities. This invitation to move upstream is only for those who want to be successful in bringing about a more sustainable, just, and peaceful world. Everyone else can stop reading now.

For those who seek a true solution to overpopulation, we must first realize how overpopulated the U.S. is relative to our resources. To continue to promote population growth is to stress those resources and endanger all who live within our boundaries. We must be informed – and that information must make us steadfast, fearless, and thorough in our quest. We must reframe the issue to be about already-stressed resources, and not play ball on “their” playing field. The naysayers will criticize us for espousing racial, intellectual, or nationalistic superiority. We must remain clear about our objectives: to focus on the way resources should inform U.S. policies. It is an ecological perspective which knows no prejudice.

In the mindset of many Americans, overpopulation is an “over there” problem. While it is true that Africa and India have growth projections which are frightening, it doesn’t mean that we are problem-free. Our problems lie in our extreme consumption and the overpumping of our aquifers. In a time of climate change, our water resources are a particularly limiting factor to how many people the U.S. can hold. Here, we face an urgent (and a particularly uphill) battle – but our commitment to reversing population growth is especially vital. With less than 5% of the world’s population, Americans are responsible for consuming a disproportionately larger share of global resources. (For example, in 2014 the U.S. share of global energy consumption was 17.8% – an increase of 1.2% from the year before.¹) And we are continuing to grow by an average of one person every 13 seconds – adding over 2.4 million new residents each year who will consume ever-more resources.²

If we are to preserve a livable future for our children and grandchildren, we must be steadfast in our mission to move upstream and reverse population growth. Time is running out.

THE SNAKE OIL OF CONSERVATIONISM

I am informed by being a lifelong naturalist. I am not an economist. I have never been a statistician, nor am I a sociologist. I look at the world through the lens of ecology, and am deeply troubled that our species – the modern human animal – has been trying to cheat the laws of nature for such a long time. Collectively, we have bought into the story that we can grow our numbers infinitely – on a finite planet with limited vital resources – and suffer zero consequences. When problems created by overpopulation are tackled, our rhetoric is filled with blame for our leaders. It is *they* who must have messed up. In essence this is fair, for they didn't tell us the whole truth – that growing infinitely on a finite planet is our current recipe for disaster. We are living that disaster each day, as the U.S. Census Bureau estimates that 1 million people are added to our already overpopulated planet every 4.68 days (net gain).³

Many who work in the social and ecological justice movements have been selling us the lie that we can take on more and more people if we just were better at distribution... had better laws... invested in technology... and sang Kumbaya each night with our neighbors while jumping over campfires. Many now believe (thanks to these great snake-oil salesmen) that if we only reprioritized our investments in green energy and mustered the political willpower... the next two billion people will be no problem – bring them on!

This attitude is particularly prevalent in the U.S. For example, any discussion that preserving our aquifers – which are already in overshoot – is a sufficient and ethical reason to stop increasing our population through immigration is dismissed, and often deemed racially biased. Powerful business lobbies and special interest groups rally under the “pro-growth” battle cry, persuading our nation's elected officials that our economy and standard of living depend on importing more and more “new Americans.” They have a downstream argument. They say that because immigrants have built America, we have and always will welcome them to our shores. They also point out that in an aging society, we need more workers to contribute to the Social Security coffers. Nowhere in their discourse is the upstream ecological reality – namely, the strain those new residents place on our

already-overburdened ecosystem, infrastructure, or natural resources.

I shouldn't be surprised that people can be so easily convinced of things that are not true, even things that are bad for them. It is a deadly assault launched frequently by Corporate America, who is interested exclusively in its own bottom line. We are deceived so often that the mirage has become our comfortable reality. We not only accept their stories, we line up for them with enthusiasm – and then wonder why the latest diet pills aren't working, or why our landfills are filling up with the toys that become obsolete each day.

What *does* surprise me is how leaders of the conservation and sustainability movements continue to shy away from dealing with overpopulation in a responsible way. We need a unified force to convince media outlets, politicians and political pundits, teachers, and nonprofit leaders that overpopulation is the engine that is driving humanity's train of destruction. Instead, we have only a relatively few brave souls who are willing to raise their hand and say “what about overpopulation?”

If you let it into your consciousness, overpopulation will grab you by the scruff of your neck and ask you the hardest question of all: “How do you think you can be successful saving all the species that need to be saved – including our own – when we are already running out of so many vital resources and America is adding a net gain of one person every 13 seconds?” The answer, of course, is: “You can't.”

Ignoring overpopulation is making everything worse, and the solutions of yesterday are obsolete. Just last week, the U.S. had 46,500 fewer people to feed and clothe. So this week, those 46,500 people mean we lost more acres of arable soil and added more carbon to our climate.

OVERPOPULATION: THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM

So where is the hope? It lies in daring to tell the *whole truth* about sustainability – and that truth says that human numbers matter, too. It means eliminating the taboos associated with this topic. Anyone in the business of making the world a better place needs to understand and work on spreading the message. We cannot just take shorter showers and ban luxury items. We cannot hope that solar paint and wind turbines will

make enough of a difference. We must accept reality – the pressure of overpopulation pushes the poor off the cliff first... but it will come for the rest of us, too. It already has in many ways.

Overpopulation is there, singing its tune of overshoot in the traffic jam you were in this morning. It is slathered on the lottery you must now enter to get a campsite in the most popular national parks. Overpopulation is always in the news without ever being named. It's in the new housing developments where open spaces used to be. It is glaring at you when you hear about the latest animal put on the endangered species list. And it is burning in the fires of wars waged over ever-scarcer resources. The protestors who nobly fight fracking machinery and copper sulfate mining proposals need to add overpopulation to their protest signs. The scarcity of non-renewable resources is driven by overpopulation – inflating their price and fueling expensive extractions, which never have a happy ending.

My philosophy about solving any problem is that you must first name it, blame it, and then fix it. We are natural animals, and in the animal world you can fix overpopulation in only two ways: either on the death side, or the birth side. At present global rates, births are exceeding deaths by nearly 9,000 each hour⁴ – and the 5 billion people we have added in the last 85 years or so have pushed the earth over its carrying capacity. If I had a nickel for every time someone told me “Don't worry, nature will adjust itself,” I could buy dinner for a lot of friends. They actually are correct; we will one day get back to a sustainable number of people “naturally.” Unfortunately, that will happen when we run out of resources – and you won't want your worst enemies to bear witness to that horrific scenario. *Overpopulation therefore must be tackled on the birth side. It is a much more compassionate choice, and allows for the kind of world we want because resources will have a chance to renew.*

This solution is, of course, mired in the muck of everything from religious dogma to ignorance of basic ecological principles. Many people in the U.S. have never had a single ecology course, and therefore may not realize they live on a planet with limited – and declining – resources. They are unaware that they are living at a time when humanity's demand on nature is exceeding the biosphere's supply – and its ability to regenerate. Multi-national corporations don't want

the overpopulation message out there, for fear the loss of human numbers will translate to a loss of revenue. They do a wonderful job distracting us with their latest gadgets and reality TV shows. The overpopulation issue is also undermined by many in the social justice field, who believe that talk of population growth is code for genocidal actions – when, in reality, the opposite is true.

REAL CHANGE INSTEAD OF “EMPATHY”

Moving upstream does not require more empathy. It requires a broader, more compassionate understanding of life on a global scale. In fact, empathy gets in the way. Psychologist and Yale professor Paul Bloom has studied empathy, and he theorizes that it gets in the way of accomplishing more important goals. Empathy is our knee-jerk reaction when we see the pain and suffering of others – we rush in to offer food and clothing. This makes *us* feel better, but has it really solved anything?

In the case of overpopulation, empathy is very detrimental. Take the global conservation organization Greenpeace – known for its bold acts to save whales and rainforests. Apparently, it is easier to challenge ships on the high seas than it is to include an overpopulation message within their marketing. Instead, their website states that: “Our oceans are in crisis... Three quarters of global fish stocks are suffering from overfishing, and 90% of top marine predators are already gone.”⁵

Here is another example of a major environmental organization failing to help their supporters connect the dots. By not citing overpopulation as the driving force behind overfishing, Greenpeace offers inadequate solutions – and the world continues to grow by another 213,718 people per day! Their mission is designed to play on your feelings of empathy:

“Greenpeace... uses peaceful protest and creative communication to expose global environmental problems and to promote solutions that are essential to a green and peaceful future. ...Our committed activists and supporters have come together to ban commercial whaling, convince the world's leaders to stop nuclear testing, protect Antarctica, and so much more. ...Our fight

*to save the planet has grown more serious – the threat of global warming, destruction of ancient forests, deterioration of our oceans, and the threat of a nuclear disaster loom large. Greenpeace is actively working to address these and other threats.”*⁶

This list contains no effort to help stop population growth and reduce human numbers. Donors are not educated about the driving force behind any of these serious environmental problems. Greenpeace is failing its own mission. Perhaps they don't get this issue – or are afraid their donations will decline if they do. Regardless, they are making things worse. Visitors to their website are going to feel good about “*doing something*,” even though it doesn't address the root cause of these problems. These donors receive a false message – they are sold a so-called “solution” that will never work without a concerted attempt to humanely reduce Homo sapiens' numbers. They leave the overpopulation issue to population groups to solve – but fewer environmental activists will hear our message because *they believe they have already contributed to the “solution.”*

Empathy never requires that we ask why something is happening. We want to offer help, because that action produces a feeling that we are “doing something.” I once asked a friend who had bravely gone to Darfur, Sudan during the famine about his experience there. Once a day, he fed people a meal. The average family he saw was a woman with four emaciated children. He spent three weeks in tents in the sweltering heat, nobly believing his work was helping to avert an even bigger crisis. Although I already knew the answer, I asked: “Did you work side-by-side with population groups handing out and educating about birth control?” He answered: “No, we were just there to feed them.”

I explained: “Well, now you will need to find even more food – *because next year, that same poor woman is likely to bring back her fifth child to feed.*” He was stunned. It never occurred to him that, while well-intentioned, their empathy might have been creating a bigger problem.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES – THE UNSUSTAINABLE TRUTH

That story is one that perpetuates a dangerous

myth: that overpopulation is a problem exclusively for developing nations. Every country has limited resources – and the U.S., with its excessive consumption of resources, is at the top of that list. The drought crisis centered in California is a case in point. Conservation efforts are underway, but the mass media is not discussing how overpopulation relates to California's critical water shortage. It would not be difficult to point out that in 1900, the Golden State had less than 1.5 million residents.⁷ And if population growth trends are allowed to continue as they are now, by 2050 California will be bursting at the seams with nearly 50 million residents.⁸

Those 48 million additional people, added in just 150 years, are helping to bring about the water crisis. And, contrary to popular myth, the drought will not shift appreciably even if every Californian decides to conserve water and gives up their lawn and swimming pool. As much as self-proclaimed activists often want concrete “things to do,” they are often unsatisfied – or even appalled – by the suggestion to become crusaders for humane population reduction. Even major environmental organizations whose missions call for “true sustainability” are unwilling to champion the cause.

For this reason, I no longer attend an event which used to give me great solace – the Living Green Expo, which is held annually in St. Paul, Minnesota. I have repeatedly encouraged its various leaders to help educate the public about overpopulation. Instead, they mislead people into believing the fairy tale – that simply buying bamboo flooring, supporting organic growers, and investing in affordable solar power will make everything well with the world. People leave smiling, their recycled-content cloth gift bags filled with organic soaps and sustainable snacks, inspired to join other eco-minded warriors on a mission to be greener. *But here is the ugly truth: all the green light bulbs and organic produce in the world won't keep us from falling off the resource cliff.* This feel-good event sends a false, and ultimately dangerous, message.

I thought of an idea that would put the true consequences of overpopulation in context against all of the “green acts” our society promotes. At the entrance of the Expo, a laptop computer could be displayed that is cued to a clock of current U.S. and world populations. At current growth rates, the U.S. clock will add 1 person every 13 seconds and the world

clock will add 148 people per minute – remarkable figures to see in action. As entrants come into the building, they could be asked to predict what the population numbers will be by the time they leave the event. This is a simple and inexpensive demonstration to implement, and it could have a powerful impact – especially if, upon exiting the event, participants were given a small handout on population statistics and resource information. Through this modest addition, a huge number of activists could learn that – *unless and until we work to reduce population numbers – we cannot call ourselves truly green.*

Those who run the event, and there have been several agencies, have always had an excuse why this couldn't be done. The latest incarnation of this event is called "Minnesota Goes Green." I offered to staff a booth there on behalf of World Population Balance in the spring of 2014, offering to fit into their format and pay all expenses. After several ignored emails and phone calls, it was clear that they were not interested in having overpopulation groups anywhere near their event. I guess it would spoil their narrative, or potentially disturb their sponsors.

MORE SILENCE ON OVERPOPULATION

One of the very important reasons we need more people – especially articulate ones – to find the courage to move upstream is that we need activists who are willing and able to call out false messages. There are so many, most go uncontested.

One example is the show "Nature" by PBS. There are many episodes demonstrating their poor messaging by omission, but one show on the Arctic was more outrageous than usual. The entire hour-long program was about changes taking place in the Arctic Ocean – changes which are causing the demise of the polar bear and the rise of orca, or killer whales, due to the year-round open water. I was stunned how "Nature" (which is supposed to be science-based) could get through a whole show about the polar ice caps melting and never mention climate change – let alone overpopulation. But a basic Internet search of the program's underwriters revealed a fairly obvious answer. It is not in the interest of the American Gas Association or the Siemens electronics company to let you know how their behavior is affecting wildlife.

An exhibit at the Science Museum of Minnesota called "Future Earth" was another shocker. Visitors are told the right population numbers in the exhibit, but they leave hearing a skewed version of reality. Like most of America, the museum is hedging its bets on growing more corn to feed the ever-growing numbers of hungry people. The exhibit includes nothing about the real crisis humanity is facing, and perpetuates a dangerous boldfaced lie – *that technology will descend upon us in the right political climate and save the day.* I wrote a letter, but the museum responded in a very corporate manner. It left me wondering what would happen if they got 15 letters, or even a few protestors who showed up at their next Board meeting.

It used to give me great comfort knowing that the National Science Foundation funded such projects. Now I realize that they, too, must dole out funds in a political world – and that world has not been too friendly to science as of late. Congress controls their funding, and much of Congress has been bought and paid for by the fossil fuel industry. *In the 114th Congress alone, 170 elected representatives have taken over \$63.8 million from the fossil fuel industry – and subsequently do whatever they can to deny human-caused climate change.*⁹ Overpopulation is nowhere on their radar screen – and if it were, they would probably deny that, too.

It is hard to blame Americans for being ignorant about issues that are being hidden from them at every turn. However, there are some bold organizations who are creatively trying to cut through the fog. For instance, the Center for Biological Diversity's website devotes an entire page to educating visitors about the population issue. They state: "Human population growth and overconsumption are at the root of our most pressing environmental issues...."¹⁰

This brave NGO launched the Endangered Species Condom Project, a bold effort to help the public make the connection between human numbers and species protection. They created quite a stir with their "Wrap with care, save the polar bear" condoms, along with others. While certainly unconventional and even daring, the group's creativity and humor is commendable – and, most importantly, the campaign has been effective. It is popular among young people, and has gained serious traction with the media. There are hundreds of other conservation organizations in the U.S., many with international offices. Imagine

the global impact if more groups were discussing overpopulation, or identifying it as a root cause of much of the distress in the world of wildlife protection.

Along with empathy, the concept of freedom also gets in the way of fully addressing overpopulation. Americans in particular like to be “free” to make decisions for themselves – especially when it comes to how many children they have. The women’s movement is particularly focused on “getting the government out of the bedroom,” and allowing women the “freedom” to control their own destiny. This is why China’s one-child policy has been so disliked in the West. When I speak to various groups about overpopulation, it is inevitable that someone will criticize “such draconian measures.” However, I try to put China’s policy in context of when it was implemented – back in 1979. It was inspired by a 20-year famine that claimed 30 million lives.¹¹ When the famine began, the average Chinese woman had 6.5 children.¹² The Chinese government estimates that average was down to 1.7 children per woman by 2013 – and that the one-child policy prevented 400 million births, along with much additional suffering.¹³

When it comes to implementing any official population policy, one must ask – what pain will be averted? Overpopulation hurts women and families, impairing prosperity and condemning them to poverty in many countries. It robs children of a promising future. *Matching available resources with a sustainable demand is deeply humane.* Otherwise, mothers will continue to needlessly suffer as they watch their children struggle. Women are already oppressed by the patriarchal and/or religious structures of many societies around the world. Overpopulation only serves to exploit them further – more children to feed and clothe makes their lives even worse.

MORE TIMID THAN EVER: OUR POLITICIANS TODAY

It is hard to imagine even the most liberal of politicians tackling this issue today. I have personally met with some of them, and even those long-retired from Congress are still too timid to get involved. This was not always the case.

President Nixon has gone down in history with the Watergate debacle around his political neck. Few realize that in 1969, when the U.S. population

was around 202.6 million, President Nixon aimed to “set forth a far-reaching American commitment to helping limit the further unchecked increase of human numbers. [He] set in motion a broad range of government activities, both domestic and international.”¹⁴ These activities included:

1. The creation of the Commission on Population Growth and the American Future;
2. Increased research on birth control methods of all types, and the sociology of population growth;
3. Expanded programs to train more people in the population and family planning fields, both in this country and abroad;
4. Expanded research on the effects of population growth on our environment and on the world’s food supply; and
5. Increased domestic family planning assistance, aimed at providing adequate family planning services to all who want but cannot afford them. This bold initiative was later squelched – but imagine the impact of that kind of program today.

Early in his presidency, President Obama was well-informed about the seriousness of overpopulation. He is also obviously painfully aware of the current political climate – which is too tenuous for him to lead the way for a real solution. A Google search of “overpopulation and U.S. politicians” will come up empty – no elected official in office, or even out of office, wants to touch this issue.

This is because – as a matter of professional survival – before taking a position on any issue, most elected officials today will put their finger in the air and see which way the political winds are blowing. They also must follow the wishes of their major donors, as it is so expensive to run any election campaign. Therefore money talks louder than it should, especially after the democracy-killing Citizen’s United ruling from the Supreme Court.

Because of this deadly recipe for inaction, *far too many Americans remain unaware of how overpopulation is already impacting their lives.* This hurdle will only be overcome by a very extensive grassroots movement to demand leadership on the overpopulation crisis. The political climate will bend

back in the direction of sane population policies when people raise their educated voices in deep concern about overpopulation and its negative impacts on our country.

OUR CULTURAL CLIMATE CAN CHANGE

Our cultural climate is preventing the U.S. from planning for a better future. It is not about technology or the need to invent more birth control. It is all about understanding how deeply moral it is to *do everything we humanely can* to reduce the suffering overpopulation creates. The dominant narrative is the opposite of sane – it assumes that there is endless space, endless water reserves, and endless cropland to support ever-increasing demands from more and more people.

Alon Tal, former visiting professor at the Stanford Center for Conservation Biology said: “The good news is that *public policy matters and can reduce overpopulation*. Many countries, from Bangladesh and Iran to Singapore and Thailand, adopted policies that incentivize small families, make birth control available, provide better social security and most of all – empower women. The results are remarkable, showing that trend need not be destiny.”¹⁵

Thailand’s Mechai Viravaidya did not let his country’s modest Buddhist inclinations stop him from trying to make them comfortable with using contraception. He used his relative wealth to serve his country, working to help them get their population growth under control – and he was very successful. When Viravaidya began his work in family planning, women on average were having six children.¹⁶ With encouragement, education, the availability of birth control, and choices to prevent births, by 2013 Thailand had reduced that number to 1.5 children per woman on average.¹⁷ Viravaidya’s work demonstrated that even in a typically shy, mostly Buddhist country, it can be done.

In all areas of freedom, poverty, peace, and justice, we must attach “success” to “dealing with overpopulation.” We must have the conversations at our coffee shops and dinner parties, at our civic clubs and church groups. An informed and organized grassroots effort can change the cultural barometer on the topic – moving it from a taboo to a must-do.

WON’T YOU JOIN ME UPSTREAM?

It is undeniably daunting to even begin to try and eliminate the taboos surrounding overpopulation, but the alternative – doing nothing – is so much worse. If you want tomorrow to bring a more just, peaceful, and sustainable world, this is your issue. Grab it by the scruff of the neck. Don’t fear it, or the blowback from those less informed than you. Fear what is happening – and what will happen with continued ignorance and subversion. Never underestimate the sheer power of overpopulation to sabotage our noblest of efforts.

When you join me upstream, remember to focus on all of the positive outcomes of a truly sustainable human population. By focusing on this critical issue, you will in fact be making real progress on a multitude of important issues. You will be trying to achieve more open spaces for wildlife, with less traffic and pollution. You will be encouraging a real chance for more fish, reptiles, and mammals to thrive – and a world with fewer wars fought over diminishing resources. Women’s equality and empowerment could become a greater reality, when access to contraception allows them to voluntarily reduce their family size – and having fewer children grants them the opportunity to work or get an education. Not every issue will disappear if we solve overpopulation, *but no issue will be solved in the long term if we do not*.

I hope you will accept this invitation to join me upstream – whether you are an artist, a clergy member, a journalist, a politician... and especially if you are already in the conservation field. And if you already consider yourself an overpopulation activist, congratulations on telling the truth! My advice is to make sure that while you are telling people the full truth, you also ensure that people see the possibility of success. The probability of success may be harder to defend, but if we don’t point to a way out of this mess then we will only succeed in depressing our readers. It will certainly be nice to have more company upstream, where the problems begin.

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