

Cry, the Overcrowded Country

A Post-Earth Day Requiem

by Diana Hull

Earth Day, which is celebrated on April 22nd, evolved from the “land ethic” ideas put forth by Aldo Leopold in 1949. Leopold wanted to extend the general imperative for moral behavior toward other people and the community, to taking a moral stance toward the environment. He called this new movement “ecocentrism.” In 1970, Senator Gaylord Nelson launched the annual observance called Earth Day as a time to contemplate the condition of the natural world and encourage action for its care and protection. But ecocentrism can only be effective if people protect that part of the earth for which they are responsible — their immediate surroundings, their home community and their country — places where they have some influence and a measure of control.

Clearly respect for carrying capacity is fundamental to stewardship, if growth is not to outrun our resources. And comprehensive programs to conserve and recycle will fail if population continues to grow. So why would major environmental organizations, who work for population stabilization all over the world, refuse to embrace this agenda at home?

It is because in the last several years the leaders of organizations like the Sierra Club have been subjected to the fuming hyperbole of pro-immigration's professional activists. They have been subjected to cant of the kind that makes politically correct folks quiver, then crumble, and finally acquiesce in the taking of unprincipled positions.

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The United States will have half a billion people by the middle of the next century and nothing could be worse for the environment than to have our own country and other economically vigorous, but high consumption, Western nations become even more populated. One ominous consequence, should we not be able to stop this growth, is the continued decrease of farmland acreage in high-immigration nations like the United States, Canada and Australia — countries which are the only remaining net exporters of food. Poor people who can't feed their own children are less likely to agonize about saving the forests and protecting the butterflies.

Attention to crowding, blight and quality of life is more likely a concern of those whose basic needs are already taken care of. Yet, for being both motivated and able to focus on nature-conserving tasks, the environmental movement has now been labeled “elitist.” But elitist is a mild rebuke compared to what the new social justice activists are calling “mainline” environmentalists now. They are being called “racists,” “nativists,” and worse if they dare to talk about the causal chain that links immigration, overpopulation, and environmental degradation.

With a population of 180 million people in 1970, the United States was close to sustainable size, but mass immigration in the last twenty years nullified that collective decision of American families to have fewer children. Having been the sought-after new land for over 200 years, long before our environment was threatened by overuse, the U.S. tried, with some breaks in the pattern, to continue that tradition. Despite dramatically changed circumstances, we still remain the destination country for a million and a half people a year. There is a broad consensus that that number needs to be lowered substantially. Forty different opinion polls show that result, but few elected officials have the courage to do anything about it.

As a result, we are now at an impasse, where the demand for water, landfill and housing, and the conservation of wetlands and wildlife butts up against cherished beliefs about the giving of shelter, the free movement of people and the "right of abode." One obstacle to action is the velvet glove of compassion; the other is the intimidating fist of "political correctness."

As a way out of this dilemma, major environmental groups, like the Sierra Club, have tried to finesse the issue by placing the blame for environmental degradation on U.S. patterns of consumption alone, and by embracing global, rather than national, approaches to population stabilization.

Since biological systems are interdependent it was logical to look at the earth as a single entity. It is admittedly high-minded — some would say arrogant — to try and manage the fertility of the rest of humanity and influence the population density of every nation on the planet. But despite "global village" yearnings the world's people are still organized into nation states, bounded socially, culturally, philosophically and in some places physically, with various kinds of borders and gates. Consequently the world's people haven't been "pureed" yet, and that's not all bad.

Within these real and intangible confines, people have, at least theoretically, the power and surely the responsibility, to shape their own destiny, including how crowded they want their country to be.

Present U.S. size is not the result of any enunciated policy. It is more the product of purposeful neglect by government in response to vigorous special-interest advocacy. Although those who benefit most from our startling growth like to attribute it to some "inevitable, unstoppable natural force," it is neither necessarily "natural" nor unstoppable.

When environmentalists take the global approach to over-population, it is really an escape route from an issue that is now perceived as "too sensitive" to deal with and more difficult than it actually is. The idea that we must solve this problem everywhere, rather than by you and me, here and now, has been latched onto by the faint of heart and conviction. The global approach conveniently transfers the problem of too many people way off somewhere else, at a great distance — in Africa, Asia or India — anywhere but in our own communities.

As a polity, the United States, itself, is vast and hardly manageable. If we refuse or don't know how to eat our own share of that elephant-sized population problem, how can we claim to know how to be successful on a global scale? When Carl Pope, executive director of the Sierra Club, announced piously last year that "overpopulation is a world-wide problem," it wasn't exactly "breaking news." But there was a "method" in his talking as if the U.S. was too small an arena to warrant his concern,

Pope's was a well thought-out approach, with no political price. All of the big New York- and D.C.- based population groups had already gone international because family planning for the Third World is a criticism-proof way to spend the money of American charitable foundations. This effort has meager opposition, except from the Catholic Church. Yet this laudable work overseas doesn't even have a marginal effect on the upward spiral of U.S. population because mass immigration to the United States has already gained too much momentum for that.

The pressure on us will continue from many directions because more than 4.7 billion people live in countries poorer than Mexico, and that number is growing by 80 million a year. Any possible leveling off of world population is not predicted until after the 21st century.

Yet we were being told, in effect, by all of the international population foundations, and recently by most major environmental organizations, that stabilizing our own population is not part of their mission — that, in effect, what they are doing is bigger and more important than that.

This reluctance to tackle the problem at home is due to lobbying by both business and ethnic activists who argue that in the United States, unlike in the world outside, "numbers don't matter." Demographer Meredith Burke points out that open border groups, and now some environmentalists, are now claiming that "population size is disconnected from its environmental consequences."

The Sierra Club, ZPG (Zero Population Growth) and other organizations endorsed this view when the fumes of political correctness became particularly pungent. But how can anyone accept the proposition that population size affects the environment overseas, but not in the United States? What is now "off the table" in the Sierra

Club, for example, is any mention about how the vastly increased human presence caused by immigration to the United States can defeat their other programs to conserve our natural resources.

Fortunately many senior luminaries of the movement like Lester Brown, David Foreman, Stewart Udall, Anthony Beilenson and Gaylord Nelson, founder of Earth Day, continue to “call it like it is.” All are currently out of favor with the revamped Board of Directors that is now dominated by “social justice” leaders from the “Political Ecology Group” who care primarily about protecting the rights of immigrants and keeping levels of immigration high.

Environmentalists who disagree are soon accused of “racism” and their opinions described as “the greening of hate.” That particular phrase is so catchy that every press report about the Sierra Club internal conflict last year carried those words in the headline

Behind this push to keep the environmental groups away from the immigration issue is the widespread understanding that they are the natural constituency for a more restrictive population policy. The worst thing that could happen to the pro-immigration forces would be for a large and influential organization like the Sierra Club to lobby Congress for immigration reduction — or even demand a formal U.S. population policy, which would undoubtedly lead to immigration restriction.

To stop that from happening the National Immigration Forum decided they were environmentalists too, declaring they would address the “root causes” of immigration, while combating “white supremacy” and “institutional racism.” Attempts at population reduction, they said, showed hostility to “people of color” and was a “scapegoating and bashing of immigrants.” They claimed this “hateful atmosphere” was fomented by population stabilization groups working in the United States, which they said were composed of “eugenicists” and “neo-Nazi’s.” Actually the founders and leaders of organizations like FAIR (The Federation for American Immigration Reform) were past presidents of ZPG and Planned Parenthood and had spent their lives working for pro-social causes and in all manner of efforts to protect natural resources.

By 1995, the National Immigration Forum (NIF) had gotten their own people appointed to the Sierra Club board and committees. The bridges NIF used into the

Sierra Club were political organizations interested in “Environmental Justice.” These NIF client-groups took on some worthwhile projects, such as removing toxic waste dumps in poor neighborhoods. But they also promoted virtually unlimited entry into the United States, especially for what they called “people of color” — a new “right” in the social justice lexicon. By 1996 these newly-minted environmentalists persuaded the Sierra Club board to “take no position on immigration levels, or on policies governing immigration into the United States.”

Trying to understand these events better, I talked with Dr. Judith Kunofsky, a 25-year veteran of the environmental movement. She says frankly that she comes from the political left. She was the long-time executive director of the Yosemite Restoration Trust and chair of the Population Committee of the Sierra Club. In that position she authored the club's policy statement in 1989, writing that “the club would always make the connection between immigration, population increase and the environmental consequences thereof.” At that time the U.S. was admitting 507,000 people a year, less than half the number admitted today.

Under her leadership, club policy had always been that Sierrans deal “not only with the number of people on the planet, but the number of people in every nation on the planet.” But, she said, “I became weary when my opponents got vicious.”

“I was getting into constant fights over this,” she said, “because it was claimed that talking about population numbers infuriated ‘people of color,’ and that was the reason we were told that the Sierra Club shouldn't deal with this issue. It was a strange position,” she said, “for an organization that was supposed to say truthful things on behalf of the earth. I always quoted poll reports to them showing that the majority of Hispanics also support immigration restriction. But the leadership of the Sierra Club was, at that point, dealing only with the liberal-foundation-supported activists, who claimed to speak for everyone, but really did not,” she said.

Kunofsky continued by saying, “It was obvious that if you are talking about population, you are really talking about immigration — a direction in which the Sierra Club refused to go. What they decided to include as population issues were being pro-choice and pro-family planning.”

“This policy of avoidance began several years earlier,” she remembered, “with a telephone call from a

Hispanic member of Congress from Southern California. One of his staffers told our field representative that the Congressman was outraged that the Club wanted to limit immigration. And then a number of Hispanic citizen's groups in Los Angeles threatened that if the Sierra Club opposed immigration, they wouldn't work with them on air pollution issues. I even made 'left wing' arguments against immigration like those made by the Socialist Workers Party, i.e. that new entrants compete with the organized working class for jobs. But you still couldn't get anywhere with the pro-immigration activists. I don't have a good sense about where this is heading," she said.

Kunofsky believes that population restriction is clearly critical to protecting the environment and that the vast majority of Americans agree it is in the national interest to do so. The reason there is paralysis on this issue, she says, is that those with "politically correct" counter opinions are willing to throw away everything else to support continued immigration. "When you have ethnic spokesmen saying to environmentalists that 'we won't work with you on clean air if you support immigration restriction' well," she said, "that is an admission that increasing their own numbers takes precedence over all other considerations and that environmental concerns are secondary."

She thinks that inertia will continue to drive high levels of immigration, and as new parts of the country have more and more people who are recent immigrants, that will increase immigration even more as they press to bring in their relatives.

The San Francisco-based Political Ecology Group (PEG) was given the task of promoting the Sierra's Club's new direction and to work for a club initiative that excluded immigration from the agenda. They persisted in the bizarre argument that "there is no causal relationship between the number of people and environmental impacts." The interesting thing was how many of their ideas were identical to those of the late Libertarian think tank guru Julian Simon, an economist, and one of those "right wing zealots" the PEG claimed to hate so much. Julian Simon also rejected the idea of "carrying capacity," and declared there was no meaningful physical limit to our growing forever. He argued that the supply of natural resources increases as populations grow, and that the United States was an example of a place where "the need for increased resources leaves us with a

permanently increased ability to get them."

David Foreman, co-founder of Earth First, didn't remark on Julian Simon's ideas, but called the Political Ecology Group "race-baiting hooligans of the left, who make it impossible to have an intelligent discussion on this subject."

Environmentalists of his persuasion will also be disappointed to learn that nearly every one of the 48 members of Congress who received support from the Sierra Club or the League of Conservation Voters for their pro-environment record, also worked to defeat even modest proposals to reduce the number of immigrants. Refusal to grasp the problem of cognitive dissonance that this represents only delays doing what is necessary, i.e. requiring an environmental impact report on all facets of immigration policy.

It came to naturalist Loren Eiseley in a dream that man could by nature be a parasite, a spore bearer and a world eater. We could be in our "swarming" phase right now, he wrote, full of insatiable hunger and running through nature as if it were inexhaustible. He warned us not to heed the disastrous growth messages that were drowning out the ear of reason and instead, through our culture, "make a conscious reentry into the sunflower forest we had thought merely to exploit and abandon."

After working on the "sustainable numbers" problem for years, Judith Kunofsky is convinced that reducing immigration has become increasingly impossible politically — that we may already have reached the point where we can't do anything about it. Although the public wants immigration slowed down, she is not sure that significant numbers of people have any gut sense that there really are environmental limits. "I am not optimistic," she said — a disquieting thought for the "ecocentric" founders of Earth Day, still hoping for the joy that would come to us all from an uncrowded country. □

NOTES

1. New people on the Sierra Club Board (1998) or in other leadership positions include Board Member Cathie Tactaquin, executive director of The National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights, along with Brad Erickson, coordinator of the Political Ecology Group and editor of the Sierra Club book, Call to

Action: Handbook for Ecology, Peace and Justice.

2. The National Network for Immigrant and Refugee Rights is an umbrella group with 22 organizations represented. One of the member groups is CHIRLA (Coalition for Humane Immigrants Rights of Los Angeles) CHIRLA itself is a coalition of 125 civil rights groups, organized to improve conditions for immigrants in Los Angeles. CHIRLA has close ties to the Mexican government through their consulate in Los Angeles. The ACLU and MALDEF are members of CHIRLA.

3. In 1998, Sierra Club members were given the opportunity to vote on whether the club should work to reduce immigration. For a comprehensive discussion of the ballot issues, see Roy Beck's 8-page review of December 12, 1997. This is part of the Environmental Poster Project at www.numbersusa.com.