



FOR THE MEDIA

Observations on Media Coverage
of Population & Environmental Issues

**Dodging Numbers
Reporters Avoid The Population Crunch**

By Michael Maher

SEJ
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The following is a short article based on his scholarly study
How and Why Journalists Avoid the Population-Environment Connection
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FOLLOWED BY

Does Population Matter?

By Michael Maher

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Many environmental stories chronicle the inevitable collisions between finite nature and growing human population. Journalists, however, are reluctant to use the "P" word in covering environmental issues.

In a study published in the March 1997 issue of the journal *Population and Environment*, I analyzed how newspaper journalists depicted causality in urban sprawl, water shortage, and endangered species stories. Using Lexis-Nexis, the world's largest database of full-text news stories, I dredged up thousands of stories and sampled them randomly. I found that just slightly more than one story in 10 mentions population growth as a source of the problem. And less than one story in 100 mentions population stability as a possible solution.

Typically a story describing urban sprawl or disruption of wildlife habitat mentions only the land developer as the cause of the problem, and ignores the role of population growth in providing the market demand that makes land development possible. A typical water shortage story mentions only the drought or the inadequate water conveyance infrastructure as a cause, and ignores the fact that many more people now want access to a limited supply of water.

The 10.7 percent of stories that do acknowledge population growth as a cause typically fail to mention that population stability might be a solution. This happens because journalists do not advocate policy change in news stories. But the reader is left with the impression that, although population growth might cause environmental problems, population stability is too loony-fringe an idea even to be mentioned in the news.

Why would journalists want to avoid mentioning population growth in stories about environmental problems? In Part II of the study I interviewed a sample of 25 journalists to find out.

My sampling drew from many parts of the country to ensure a good geographic distribution of interviewees. I also sought reporters from different-size newspapers: nine were from papers with less than 250,000 circulation, 10 were from papers with circulation of 250,000-500,000, and six were from papers with greater than 500,000 circulation.

In interviewing journalists, I explained I had retrieved their story via Lexis-Nexis, and I recounted some details of their story. Then I asked each reporter, "what would you say was the cause of the problem you wrote about?" If that open-ended question produced no mention of population, I asked, "Can you think of any

other causes? Perhaps at a deeper level of causation?" If two open-ended questions produced no mention of population growth, I brought up the subject by saying that many environmental writers considered population growth one of the ultimate causes of environmental problems. Then I asked the journalists if population growth had affected the problem the journalist had described.

Eight interviewees mentioned population in response to an open-ended question. Six discounted population as an influence on the environmental problems they had written about. Eleven reporters did not volunteer a perspective on population growth, but agreed that it was a significant cause after I brought up the subject. Of these 11, only two seemed unfamiliar with the environmental effects of population growth. The other nine were quite conversant with the role of population growth, and several mentioned that they write about it as an issue occasionally. One reporter who did not mention population in response to my open-ended questions told me she had chosen not to have children in part from environmental concerns.

These responses imply that journalists aren't putting all they know about environmental causality into their stories. Why not? Many admitted that population is a controversial issue and said they prefer to avoid it if possible. One reporter said, "It's such an incendiary issue. If you say, 'It all comes down to too many people,' you'll have everybody from Operation Rescue to the Catholic Church calling you."

Another said, "We as journalists are nervous to discuss population." Another told me, "Most of us (reporters) wait until somebody says it." Another recalled the furor over the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* advocacy of Norplant for local teen pregnancy, which produced charges of racism by area Black people.

But in addition to averting controversy, the most common reason journalists gave for avoiding population growth in their stories was that population growth did not fit within the event frame that served as their news peg. "I've got 20 inches to explain why a garter snake is endangered. There's no room for population growth in the story," one reporter said. Another said, "I don't think globally when I write a story; I think, 'what do the people in this town want to know about?'"

Many interviewees were aware of the constraints of being a local reporter. They felt that population growth was simply too broad and distant to figure in their stories. As one reporter told me: "I don't know that you can get (population) into the story. There are space limitations and the conventions of journalism are such that you have to keep your paragraphs germane to one another. If you're talking about wildlife habitat and then all of a sudden you're talking about world population growth, you've got to explain to an editor how you got there and use a lot of paragraphs to do that."

Another said in a similar vein: "It is the role of journalists to include population growth as a source of problems. But on a daily story, you can practically never do that. On a daily story, it's almost impossible. If I were to try, my editor would probably want me to spend more time defining terms, and we don't have space for that."

Yet another said, "Often daily journalism doesn't include the broad context; you find that in the op-ed pages, journalists are self-conscious about appearing intellectual; they don't want to appear self-indulgent."

From these and other similar comments, I concluded that the working principles of journalism create a vast causal dissociation with regard to population and environment: local reporters have plenty of news pegs about population-driven environmental problems, but don't have the space or the scope to connect these problems to a national issue like population growth. The national media can discuss national issues, but they cannot peg their stories around local problems that, from a national perspective, seem trivial.

What does this pattern of causal myopia in the news mean to public opinion? A May 1992 Gallup poll showed that the number of Americans who feel population growth within the United States is a major problem had diminished from 41 percent in 1971 to 29 percent in 1992. Less than half of Americans polled by Gallup in 1992 felt that population would be a problem by the year 2000.

A second poll, done in 1993 for the Pew Global Stewardship Initiative, showed similar results: less than half of a sample of Americans agreed that lowering the U.S. birthrate was important for the environment.

Most tellingly, a nationwide series of focus groups on population and environment concluded that most Americans cannot make the connection between population growth and environmental problems. The focus groups were sponsored by the Pew Global Stewardship Initiative in 1993.

In their 1995 book, *Attitudes Toward the Environment: Twenty-Five Years After Earth Day*, Ladd and Bowman concluded that the domestic population issue in the United States is essentially dead.

Despite its low salience in the news and growing public indifference, U.S. population continues to grow 10 times as fast as the growth rate of an average developed country and at the highest growth rate in the developed world. Our population has doubled in the past 50 years and at current rates could double again in 60 years. Given Americans' per-capita consumption rates, this will have stunning environmental effects.

A group is forming to try to resurrect domestic population growth as an issue. The U.S. Population Policy Project (US3P, for short) is co-chaired by Doug LaFollette, Wisconsin Secretary of State, and David Pimentel of Cornell University. It will sponsor a series of workshops, focus groups, and eventually a national population policy conference, tentatively set for Autumn in 1997. The aim of this group is not a one-shot set of meetings, but a continuing dialogue on the role of population growth in American life. This effort is just coalescing, but it has a Web site: <http://www.iti.com/iti/US3P/>.

In the meantime, as U.S. population continues to grow blithely, environmental reporters are guaranteed to have plenty of problems to write about.

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By Michael Maher

As the doomsayers/naysayers debate as the [1996] St. Louis SEJ annual conference demonstrated, the debate about population can be confusing and rancorous.

A generation ago the books that scared everyone about population – Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* and the Club of Rome's *The Limits to Growth* – focused on how population would soon grow beyond the supply of food and mineral resources. But what the neoMalthusians predicted would be The Age of Famines is today better remembered as the The Age of Polyester Leisure Suits, and the price of gasoline in constant dollars has never been lower.

The past generation has shown that population growth has much more impact on those commodities that do not respond to market incentives, that human ingenuity cannot cause to multiply. Nature, for instance. Although agronomists have tripled or quadrupled the yield per acre of grain, the maximum sustainable yield of the world's natural fisheries is fixed by Darwinian, not market forces. Hence the world's fisheries have failed to keep up with the demand from human growing numbers, and have been declining since 1988. The amount of fresh water is also finite and is not keeping up with population growth in many countries. And the supply of land is actually shrinking, so population growth inevitably has great impact on land use. Indeed, land developers are very forthcoming about the importance of population growth to their mission of converting farmland and wildlife habitat into subdivisions and outlet malls.

The two primary determinants of the need for home and commercial construction are population growth and the demolition and retirement of existing facilities, according to *When Real Estate and Home Building Become Big Business*, by L. Goodkin. Growth in population creates a need not only for housing but also for supporting real estate facilities such as shopping centers, service stations, medical clinics, schools, office buildings, and so on.

From *All About Investing in Real Estate Securities* by I. Cobleigh, "The main idea to keep in mind as you search for rewarding corporate realty investments is that in general, land prices are the resultants of population. As more people come on a given section of land, whether to build homes, to work in stores, office buildings, factories, financial institutions, or supermarkets, they create a demand for living space, land, and structures. This demand except during recession, seems like to expand indefinitely.

From *Property Development: Effective Decision-Making in Uncertain Times* by J. McMahan: "Demand for real estate at the national level is influenced by national population growth and demographic change, coupled with expanding employment opportunities and rising per capita incomes."

So yes, human population growth is an important influence on the environment. Journalists are on solid ground when they connect local environmental problems to population growth.

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