

## Why Environmentalists Support Immigration Reform

As one of the world's most populous and consumptive nations, the United States has a particular responsibility to curb its environmental degradation. To some degree, this can be done through changing our society's consumptive habits. But no amount of lifestyle changes will be able to compensate for an ever growing population.

The United States has a population growth rate that is anomalously high among industrialized nations. If there is no change in our population growth, the population of this country in 2050 will be nearly 50 percent larger than it is now. That many more people will result in that much more pressure on the environment. For us, key to gaining control over and reversing environmental degradation is stabilizing population.

Stabilizing population means a demographic 'steady-state' where, over time, the population of the country is in balance. In such a situation, the average annual population growth rate would be zero. Births and deaths, immigration and emigration would continue to refresh the population and allow it to evolve, but during that process the overall number of people in the country would remain roughly constant. In a reservoir, the surface of the water naturally fluctuates with the wind and other perturbations although the level of the water does not rise. Similarly, a stable population would have surface fluctuations but would hover at the same steady size. With a constant stream into and out of a reservoir, it renews itself but does not overflow its capacity. That way, a stable system is still a dynamic system; a stable population is not a stagnant one.

We cannot achieve such a desirable stability overnight. Like any fast-moving object, population growth has an inertia all its own and slowing population growth takes time. For that reason, it is imperative that we begin now to curb our growth rate, so that we can bequeath a stable population to our children. To curb population growth so as to achieve population stability, we must avoid returning to the large family size of earlier generations and reduce the level of today's mass immigration. America's native population actually achieved a 'replacement rate' (a birth/death rate where one child is born for each person who dies off) in about 1972. Now, over 25 years later, the United States would be well on its way to a stable population were it not for its mass immigration.

Since 1970 our population has grown by about 68 million people. Almost half of that growth came from post-1970 immigrants and their descendants. If we do not lower the level of immigration, we will add 130 million people to our population size in the next fifty years; 80 million (60 percent) of whom will be post-1995 immigrants and their descendants.

Because immigration is the driving force behind present U.S. population increase, limiting immigration is the key to slowing population growth, stabilizing our population, and reining in our environmental degradation. Limiting immigration can be accomplished practically and humanely by adhering to the following principles.

- Move from a system of expansive 'chain migration' to one of discrete 'nuclear family' migration.
- Support an enforceable cap on overall annual immigration of about 200,000.
- Deduct the immediate relatives of an immigrant in the year the primary immigrant is admitted for residence.
- Admissions under any special, new, or temporary programs (such as amnesties, paroles, or lotteries) should count toward the overall cap, and other admissions reduced accordingly.
- Enact a blanket moratorium on future immigration (other than spouses and minor children of U.S. citizens) in order to eliminate the backlog and to get a fresh start.
- Explain these groundrules clearly to the primary immigrant before he/she enters the U.S.

With such changes, the level of immigration would begin to match the level of emigration, and we would develop 'migration equilibrium' under which immigration would contribute to our economy and society, but not to our population growth. Through reform, immigration can become consistent with our environmental priorities.

We must act now. The environmental pressures caused by immigration-driven population growth are not merely a future possibility; they are a present reality. The daily news teems with tales of the effects of immigration on host communities. Runaway population growth affects not merely the big cities that traditionally receive immigration, but also smaller and more rural communities, which are now receiving both direct immigration and 'secondary migration' of natives fleeing the effects of that population growth. Stories of urban sprawl and the destruction of the surrounding farmland are rife in the media, and a feeling grows that there is nowhere to run from environmental degradation.

As tempting as it may be to stick our heads in the sand and busy ourselves with more politically acceptable aspects of the problem, we must tackle the immigration aspect as well. Until recently, environmental groups have had little problem either making the connection between immigration and the environment or taking a stance against population growth. For example, in its 1979 publication *Handbook on Population Projections*, the Sierra Club noted

that "for almost fifteen years, the Sierra Club has acknowledged that population growth is the cause of all environmental problems." Since 1965, the year the immigration law was changed in such a way as to unintentionally generate the current high levels of immigration, the Sierra Club has beaten a steady thirty year drumbeat on the need to limit environmental degradation by limiting population growth and immigration.

In recent years, however, short-term political fears have begun to silence long-term environmental wisdom. Decisionmaking, even among noted environmental organizations, has been driven more by 'political correctness' and a desire to remain insulated from criticism than a fearless devotion to protecting our natural heritage. However one may try to abdicate responsibility for addressing it, the connection between immigration, population, and the environment is no less real.

The key to maintaining a dynamic stability in any system is equilibrium. For our country to achieve a balance with nature we must accomplish a dynamic stability in our own population. In the United States, that means achieving migration equilibrium where the number of people entering our society balances with the number of people leaving it. Environmentalists owe it to themselves and to posterity to endorse efforts to reach that equilibrium through reforming legal immigration and ending illegal immigration. Difficult though that may seem, it is not nearly so difficult it is will be to deal with the consequences of ignoring the issue.

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The efforts of a group in the Sierra Club to insist that the Club take a leadership role on the issue of population policy as it interacts with protecting the environment and immigration policy has led to a ballot measure that will come to a vote among Club members in February 2001. For information on the ballot measure see [Sierrans for U.S. Population Stabilization Achieve New Ballot Measure](#) or go to the [SUSPS](#) website.

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