

PEOPLE AREN'T THE PROBLEM

By Jacqueline P. Kasun

When students enter my classes at Humboldt State University these days, they are all sure they know that the consensus of scientific opinion is that a crisis of overpopulation and environmental degradation is threatening the very survival of planet Earth. In fact, there is no such scientific consensus.

One reason why many people believe that we face a crisis of overpopulation and environmental destruction is that we all know we are crowded. To quote a famous authority: "the world is ...full, and the population is too large for the soil."¹ The speaker was St. Jerome, and he was speaking not about Brooklyn or Bangladesh in our time, but about Rome almost 2,000 years ago. He could not soar over his city as people do today and see that outside of his immediate view there were vast empty spaces with almost no people at all. Human beings crowd together, now as in ages past, not because the planet lacks space, but because we need to work together, to buy and sell, to give and receive services. Our cities and towns have always thronged with people and traffic horses, donkeys, and camels in ages past, motor vehicles today.

If all of the people in the world moved to Texas, each person could be given the space available in the typical American home and all the rest of the world would be empty.² The population density of this giant city would amount to about 20,000 persons per square mile; San Francisco has about 16,000 persons per square mile, and Brooklyn has more than 30,000.³ Most of the earth is still empty. It is estimated that the area occupied by human beings amounts to no more than 1 percent of the earth's land surface.⁴

BABY BOOM OR BIRTH DEARTH?

My students are also very surprised when I show them how rapidly the rate of world population growth is declining. In Europe and the United States, fertility has been below replacement for almost two decades and population is actually declining in several countries. Relative to their numbers, women of childbearing age are having little more than half as many babies as they did in the late 1950s.⁵

If present declining trends continue, the *less* developed regions of the world will reach zero population growth well before the end of the next century. Fertility in the less-developed world has fallen by 35 percent in the past 25 years.⁶ The crude birth rate in Mexico, for example, fell from 45 in 1965 to 28 in 1991. The World Bank's projection of the ultimate population of the world is about 10 billion, about twice its present size. At that level of population, human beings may occupy 2 percent of the earth's land surface, and we might use a fifth of the land area for our crops. At present, farmers use less than half of the available arable land.⁷

Not only do farmers use a mere fraction of the world's arable land, they also use the available agricultural resources at only a fraction of their productive capability. Roger Revelle, former director of the Harvard Center for Population Studies, has estimated that the less-developed continents-those where present food supplies are most precarious-are capable of feeding 18 billion people, or six times their present population.⁸ War and socialism, not overpopulation, are the reasons for the mass starvation found in so many countries.

In Ethiopia, soldiers seized not only the food but the draft animals as well. In China, India, and Mexico, as well as in the former Soviet Union, the government appointed itself as the only buyer of food crops, paying farmers less than the cost of their inputs. The result was tragically low food output. In all cases, when the government paid higher prices, farm output greatly increased. Nevertheless, in spite of war and socialism, world food output per person has increased about 25 percent in the past quarter century.⁹ There truly is no economic reason for anyone on earth to go hungry.

BUT WHAT ABOUT THE FORESTS?

There are other matters which are of even greater concern to my students. One of these is "deforestation." In fact, United Nations data for 1988 showed that the world's forested area of 4 billion hectares, or more than 30 percent of the world's land area, was the same as the 4 billion hectares in 1950. A more recent edition of the same publication gives a figure of 3.9 billion for 1991, the same as in 1955.¹⁰

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) in the Department of State has climbed onto the "global deforestation" bandwagon. The agency wants support for its unpopular program of requiring countries receiving U.S. foreign aid to reduce their birthrates;¹¹ it may be courting the environmental movement for that reason. It has published the threat that, at present rates of cut, the world's tropical forests could be "gone entirely by the end of the next century"¹² This calamity would require, however, not only that trees be cut twice as fast as the highest present estimates, but that no trees grow over the next century.

About 30 percent of the land area of the United States is covered with forests and woodlands. This area has not changed significantly since 1920, but the annual volume of timber growth has more than tripled over this period and significantly exceeds the rate of timber cut.¹³

It may be true, as the London *Economist* claimed, that an area the size of Switzerland was logged in Brazil in 1989. But Switzerland would fit into the forested area of Brazil 138 times; that is, Brazil cut a fraction of 1 percent of its forested area in 1989. This was probably less than the volume of timber growth that was occurring.

IS OVERPOPULATION WARMING THE GLOBE?

Climate change is the most terrifying ecological threat. Experts agree and measurements clearly indicate that the carbon dioxide content of the air has increased since the last century. Some scientists predict that this increase in carbon dioxide will cause global warming because of the reduction in the outgoing radiation from earth to space. On the other hand, the radiation from the carbon dioxide will cool the stratosphere.¹⁴ There are many unknown factors in the carbon-cycle, not the least of which are the effects of the oceans which cover more than 70 percent of the earth's surface.

In this "cascade of uncertainty," as it has been called by two scientists,¹⁵ it is possible to arrive at almost any conclusion, depending on the assumptions one programs into the computer model.

Is there any evidence of global warming in the actual measurements of Earth's temperature? James Hansen of the U.S. National Aeronautics and Space Administration says that the globe has warmed by one-half of a degree to seven-tenths of a degree centigrade over the past century.¹⁶ However, a group of scientists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration studied temperature and rainfall records at 6,000 stations in the United States for the past century. They found a great deal of year-to-year variability but no trend upward or downward.¹⁷ Scientists at Massachusetts Institute of Technology have studied records of ocean temperatures which have been collected since the mid-19th century. They report finding "no appreciable difference between 1856 and 1986."¹⁸

Whom then should we believe and what should we do? In view of the uncertainties and disagreements, probably the best counsel is that of Professor H.E. Landsberg, former president of the American Geophysical Union, who, along with other scientists, recommends that we continue measurements and observations until we know more about the situation, and, in the meantime, plant more trees.¹⁹ If this were done intensively in urban areas, it would counteract the build-up of carbon dioxide from the burning of fossil fuels because trees transform carbon dioxide into oxygen.

CORRECTED BEHAVIOR, NOT REDUCED NUMBERS

Air pollution and traffic congestion are serious problems in most American cities. But this is not global climate change. And it is not the result of population growth. For decades federal and state governments have dedicated massive efforts to providing unlimited, "free" access for automobiles. In the course of this development, urban areas have been built not only to accommodate but to require private automobile use on a one-person, one-car basis. The cause of this problem is mistaken transportation policy on the part of

government. Experience has shown that the problem could be alleviated by charging for the use of congested roadways.

While there are no data to support the wild charges about the disappearance of thousands of species, the African elephant and some other wonderful animals may be declining in numbers. The reason for this is that the elephants, unlike the horses and cows, have no human owners with an interest in keeping them alive. If agencies such as the World Bank were really interested in protecting elephants, they could devote some of the resources they are using on population control in Africa to establish and police game refuges.

Similarly there is no evidence of resource exhaustion or massive soil erosion or desertification or exhaustion of water supplies.²⁰ Above all, there is no evidence that any of our environmental problems is the result of "overpopulation" or would be improved by limiting population growth. Correcting our behavior is far more important than reducing our numbers.

The contrast between the centrally planned economies and the West is instructive on this point. The International Monetary Fund has reported that levels of industrial pollution in the former Soviet Union are 10 to 100 times greater than in the West.²¹ But the former Soviet Union has one of the lowest birth rates and one of the smallest populations relative to its land area in the world. The terrible nuclear accident at Chernobyl, clearly the result of human error, could not have been prevented by distributing condoms to the people of Chernobyl.

Free or subsidized access to goods, whether highways, fishing grounds, or forests, can invite overuse and abuse. Aristotle noticed that people take the best care of their own land, homes, and animals because they reap the benefits of their own good work and pay the costs of their own mistakes. Government planners, however, typically pass the costs of their mistakes on to the public. Modern governmental planning for progress is the source of many environmental as well as economic disasters. Alleging "overpopulation" is a handy alibi.

In addition, some special interest groups see in the alleged environmental crisis an opportunity to press their agenda of population control. By 1981 the principal population control groups--the Population Crisis Committee, the Population Reference Bureau, Zero Population Growth, the Population Action Council, and regional Planned Parenthood groups--had joined with the major environmental organizations in the United States-- the Audubon Society, the Sierra Club, the National Wildlife Federation, the Natural Resources Defense Council, Environmental Action, the National Parks and Conservation Association, and others--to call upon Congress for a national plan to stop the growth of population.²² What's more, Herman Daly, who works for the World Bank, is a longtime advocate of birth licenses which would be issued in limited numbers by the government and would be required of any person who gave birth. He claims that the alleged environmental crisis justifies his scheme.²³

Far from promoting the national welfare, population control groups are making their own domestic and foreign policy for the United States at the expense of the American taxpayers. They trample the rights of

citizens and create enemies in places where we need friends. We do need wise policies to reduce pollution and to alleviate unemployment, poverty, and hunger. At the same time, we must be extremely wary of those who would use the environment or the existence of poverty and hunger as excuses to establish their dictatorship.

Dr. Jacqueline P. Kasun is professor of economics at Humboldt State University in California.

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EXCERPTS FROM THE HOLY FATHER'S STATEMENT ON POPULATION TO MRS. NAFIS SADIK, SECRETARY GENERAL OF THE U.N. INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT

The global population situation is very complex:...The Holy See is concerned that proper attention should be given to the ethical principles determining actions taken in response to the...data on population trends. Therefore, the Holy See seeks to focus attention on certain basic truths: that each and every person—regardless of age, sex, religion or national background—has a dignity and worth that is unconditional and inalienable; that human life itself from conception to natural death is sacred; that human rights are innate and transcend any constitutional order; and that the fundamental unity of the human race demands that everyone be committed to building a community which is free from injustice and which strives to promote and protect the common good.

...Any discussion of population policies should keep in mind...the development of nations and regions...[It] must be integral, that is, it must be directed to the true good of every person and of the whole person. True development cannot consist in the simple accumulation of wealth and in the greater availability of goods and services, but must be pursued with due consideration for the social, cultural and spiritual dimensions of the human being...[It] must respect the cultural heritage of peoples and...reflect the God-given dignity of each and every person and the divine plan which calls all persons to unity. Importantly, men and women must be active agents of their own development...

In defense of the human person, the Church stands opposed to the imposition of limiting births which separate the unitive and procreative dimensions of marital intercourse, which are contrary to the moral law inscribed on the human heart or which constitute an assault on the

sacredness of life. Thus, sterilization,...because of its finality and its potential for the violation of human rights, especially of women, is clearly unacceptable;...Abortion, which destroys existing human life is a heinous evil, and it is never an acceptable method of family planning, as was recognized by consensus at the Mexico City U.N. International Conference on Population (1984)*

NOTES

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- ¹ Jerome, *The Principal Works*, cited in Jacob Viner, Religious Thought and Economic Society. Durham: Duke University Press, 1978. (pp. 33-34).
- ² 5.3 billion world population divided by 262,000 square miles of land in Texas = 20,000 persons per square mile or 1,400 square feet per person.
- ³ Based on city sizes and populations given in *Encyclopedia Britannica*.
- ⁴ Peter M. Vitousek, Paul R Ehrlich, Anne H. Ehrlich, and Pamela A. Matson, "Human Appropriation of the Products of Photosynthesis," *Bioscience* Vol. 36, No. 6, June 1986, p. 369.
- ⁵ Based on figures published by the World Bank, the U.S. Bureau of the Census, and the National Center for Health Statistics.
- ⁶ U.S. General Accounting Office, *Foreign Assistance: AID's Population Program*, GAO/NSIAD-90-112, Washington, D.C., May 1990, p. 64
- ⁷ Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, *Production Yearbook*, 1988; Roger Revelle, "The World Supply of Agricultural Land" in Julian L. Simon and Herman Kahn, eds., *The Resourceful Earth: A Response to Global 2000*. Oxford, England: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1984; Roger Revelle, "The Resources Available for Agriculture," *Scientific American*, Vol. 235, No. 3, September 1976, pp. 165-178.
- ⁸ Roger Revelle, "The World Supply," op. cit., p. 186
- ⁹ See Julian Simon, *Population Matters*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1990. (pp. 42-43). Also see FAO *Production Yearbooks*.
- ¹⁰ FAO, *Production Yearbooks*, Roger A. Sedjo and Marion Clawson, "Global Forests" in Julian L. Simon and Herman Kahn, *The Resourceful Earth*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, Inc., 1984. (pp. 147-159).
- ¹¹ Section 104(d) International Development and Food Assistance Act of 1978 (22 U.S. Code, sec. 2151-1, sec. 2151 a). 22 U.S.C. sec. 2151-1(6)(4) provides: "Development assistance ...shall be concentrated in countries which ...control ...population growth" Sec. 21516 provides that "the President is authorized to furnish assistance...for voluntary population planning[Population planning programs shall emphasize motivation for small families"
- ¹² U.S. *AID Highlights*, Vol. 6, No. 1, Winter 1989, p. 1.
- ¹³ FAO, *Production Yearbooks*, Sedjo and Clawson, op. cit., p. 147.
- ¹⁴ H.E. Landsberg, "Global Climatic Trends," in Simon and Kahn, op. cit., p. 290.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 290-291
- ¹⁶ J. Hansen and S. Lebedeff, "Global Trends of Measured Surface Air Temperature," *Journal of Geophysics Research*, Vol. 92, No.

13,1987, pp. 345-413.

¹⁷ Kirby Hanson, George A. Maul, and Thomas R Karl, "Are Atmospheric 'Greenhouse' Effects Apparent in the Climatic Record of the Contiguous U.S. (1895-1987)?" Manuscript, copyright 1988 by the American Geophysical Union; see also Richard S. Lindzen, "Some Coolness Concerning Global Warming," *Bulletin*, American Meteorological Society, Vol. 71, no. 3, March 1990, pp. 288-299.

¹⁸ Reginald E. Newell, Jane Hsiung, Wu Zhongxiang et al., *Global Ocean Surface Temperature Atlas*, forthcoming, Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, reported in *Technology Review*, November/December 1989.

¹⁹ Landsberg, op. cit.

²⁰ See Julian L. Simon, *Population Matters*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1990.

²¹ International Monetary Fund, The World Bank et al., *The Economy of the USSR: Summary and Recommendations*, 1990, p. 37.

²² See Jacqueline R Kasun, *The War Against Population: The Economics and Ideology of World Population Control*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988. (pp. 196).

²³ Herman E. Daly and John B. Cobb, Jr., *For the Common Good: Redirecting the Economy Towards Community, the Environment and a Sustainable Future*. London: Green Print of The Merlin Press, 1990. (pp. 256-259).

* See Program Resources for information on full statement.