

Immigration: Ultimate Environmental Issue

by Richard D. Lamm

I believe that environmental organizations have ducked the immigration/population issue too long, which is why I ran recently for a position on the Board of the Sierra Club to try and correct that. One of the most important challenges of public policy is to recognize when an old world is obsolete and a new one in place. If I could leave anything carved on the Colorado state capitol after my twelve years in office, it would be something like "Beware of solutions appropriate to the past, but disastrous to the future." It is easy to talk about yesterday's issues but the real policy challenges involve tomorrow's issues. To mix my metaphors, too often we steer the Ship of State by looking in the rear view mirror.

A new, important, pressing environmental question faces America: What is our demographic destiny? How big a country do we want to become? How many people can live satisfied lives within our borders? These issues will not go away and will only grow more complicated. Environmental organizations *must* add population and immigration to their list of issues and concerns. It is environmental malpractice not to.

Our natural American birth rate will lead to a stable population around 2050, with the current level of immigration our population will be approximately 500 million on its way to a billion. Which makes sense to you? I have yet to meet an American who wants one billion neighbors. Or 500 million! This is not an issue of immigrants, but of immigration. What possible public policy advantage would there be to an America of 500 million? Do we lack for people? Do we have too much open space, parkland, and recreation? What will 500 million Americans mean to our environment? Do we need a larger military? Are our schools unpopulated? Do we not have enough diversity? Will you live better lives

if your city and state double in size? These questions seem to answer themselves.

People must recognize that in the long term the growth issue in America is the immigration issue. We have a chance to stabilize America's population or double it and double it again, and the key driver is immigration. If we continue with our present policy of mass immigration (America takes twice as many immigrants as the rest of the world combined) we will continue to grow and grow and grow. The geometry is relentless.

The first census in 1790 found four million Europeans in America. Two hundred years later (1990) we had approximately 260 million Americans. That means we had six doublings of the original European population (4, 8, 16, 32, 64, 128, 256). Please note that two more doublings (we have already had 5 in our short 200 years) gives us over a billion people sharing America. Have you ever been to India or China? Is that what you want to leave to your grandchildren? Or perhaps more appropriately: Can you imagine an America of one *billion* people that you would want to leave to your grandchildren?

Of course immigration has been good for America and yes, we are all immigrants. But is that the extent and depth of the argument? Population compounds every environmental issue we face. Do you love the outdoors? What will be the impact on your children and grandchildren if we grow to half a billion (then a billion) consuming Americans? What are we doing to our children and grandchildren? Where will they be able to hike and climb? Where will they draw their inspiration when America is paved, polluted, and over-populated? Sprawl and growth? Colorado is being flooded by Californians who move here because they don't like what's happening in California.

There are approximately five billion people in the world who live below the American poverty level and polls show literally billions of them want to come to America. Immigration is no longer a solution to the problems of the world. I would argue that the best gift

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the U.S. could give to the world would be to develop a sustainable, equitable, environmentally benign nation which could serve as an example of sustainability to the world.

Bottom line: Ask yourself what problem in America will be made better by continuing to add massive numbers of people? America before immigration “reform” averaged approximately 250,000 immigrants a year. If we would return to those historic numbers, we would take a great step toward leaving our children a sustainable America.

My candidacy, and the candidacy of some other people who I have never met, never talked to, and never heard of, caused consternation among some Sierra Club old-timers. For the record: I am not an animal rights activist, but rather a hunter and fisherman who goes fishing in Alaska on a regular basis. To those who charge that anyone interested in immigration limits is a racist let me say I organized the NAACP at the University of California and served as its first Vice President. My first job out of law school was for the Colorado Anti-

Discrimination Commission, and I have received numerous brotherhood awards. When we had no money, we paid for my wife to go to Selma for the Civil Rights March to show our support. Enough said.

It is time for a new vision for America and for the environment. We have to move toward sustainability and that means addressing the twin questions of consumption and population. The Sierra Club can no longer afford to run away from this issue. When the Statute of Liberty was erected we were a relatively empty continent in an uncrowded world. Now four billion people live below the U.S. welfare level (with 75 million more added each year) and dream of coming to America. How many can and should we accept? The problem will not go away by avoiding the issue. The world’s eco-system does not need 300 million more consuming Americans, nor do we. Immigration has gone from a solution to a problem, and the sooner the public and the Sierra Club recognize this the better America we will leave our children and grandchildren. •