

*Dr. Judith Kunofsky is an environmental consultant in the San Francisco Bay area. She directed the Population Program of the Sierra Club from 1974 to 1984, was president of Zero Population Growth (ZPG) 1977-1980, and chaired the Sierra Club's Population Committee from 1986 to 1990. Dr. Kunofsky reminds us that those concerned for the environment MUST deal with such issues as population growth, and that immigration is part of US population growth.*

# WHY LIMITING POPULATION GROWTH IS SO DIFFICULT TO TALK ABOUT IN CALIFORNIA

By Judith Kunofsky

Author's note: This essay focuses on California because most of my recent experience with population debates (or, more precisely, the lack thereof) was in that state. I would be interested in learning whether these ideas ring true to those in other states as well. Please send comments to me c/o *The Social Contract*.

Why is limiting population growth so difficult for Californians to talk about? Those who raise the issue, even in private settings, have been accused of naivete, of being unrealistic, or of having elitist or racist motivations. Those who raise the issue in public forums have been dismissed with a hand wave.

Even many of those who consider themselves part of the "growth control movement," are more precisely interested in "growth management." Their concern is to ameliorate the effects of growth, to make growth pay for itself, or to create better land use and transportation patterns.

Yet much of the public would generally prefer slower population growth. A 1989 poll by the Field Institute found that most Californians (58%) believe there has been too much population growth in their communities and 65% want future population growth in their communities to be discouraged.

It is important to analyze why the subject of population stabilization brings the negative reactions it does. Otherwise, discussing the need to slow California's population growth, or specific mechanisms to slow growth, will continue to be taboo.

\* \* \* \* \*

I believe that those who refuse to discuss slowing California's population growth are, consciously or unconsciously, reflecting some of the following four concerns:

1) Belief that the effects of slowing growth would be so harmful that the subject does not merit being raised.

(2) Belief that growth is inevitable, that nothing can be done to slow growth.

(3) Belief that while the goal of slowing growth may be legitimate, the means available to slow growth are so onerous or unacceptable that discussion of the goal itself is taboo.

(4) Fear of being the only person speaking out about the importance of slowing population growth, and thereby attracting hostile attention to oneself.

Let's discuss and evaluate each of these in turn.

(1) SOME BELIEVE THAT THE EFFECTS OF SLOWING GROWTH WOULD BE SO HARMFUL THAT THE SUBJECT DOES NOT MERIT BEING RAISED

My experience is that some of the citizens of California fear that slowing population growth would adversely affect the economy, would limit options for future generations to live in the state, or would disproportionately affect certain minorities and the poor.

If these adverse effects are widely believed to be true (whether they are or not), opinion leaders will have no motivation to discuss the issue. What would change the situation is the dissemination of enough possible "pro" arguments for slowing population growth to establish the legitimacy of discussion.

The economic consequences of population stabilization clearly depend on how stabilization is brought about. Scenarios for population stabilization with a healthy economy (whether growing or not) need to be developed and popularized; this is a major task.

An analysis of the effects on future generations needs to give an assurance to potential residents that there are other good places to live in the country, and that it makes no sense to destroy what is good about California so that more people can live here. (This is precisely the point that Dr. Garrett Hardin makes in *The Tragedy of the Commons*).

Concerns about effects on minorities and on the poor reflect genuine fears. These fears can be resolved only when those who feel them come to believe that continued population growth more certainly jeopardizes

the welfare of minorities and the poor than does stabilization.

(2) SOME BELIEVE THAT GROWTH IS INEVITABLE, THAT NOTHING CAN BE DONE TO SLOW IT.

Those who believe in growth's inevitability count among their numbers both those who are pleased by the prospect and those who are distressed by it.

Many of the dynamics of growth reflect economic and demographic forces often thought to be relatively immune from state action. However, many nations in the world (and some metropolitan areas) have ongoing and extensive discussions of population policies of many kinds. Influencing population growth is part of the mandate of government agencies in many countries, is the *raison d'être* of many private philanthropic and programmatic institutions, and forms the subject matter of numerous university academic departments.

Why can't we have these kinds of discussions in California? It is perceived that some of the public policy tools which form implementation mechanisms for nations are unavailable to the California state government, and those that are available are thought to be relatively ineffective (see point #3 below). In that sense, California is seen as powerless to have any influence on the nature of its growth.

These views are false. More precisely, while the state is not in complete control of its population destiny, it could be doing far more than it is now, and could be far more effective, if there were a consensus for stabilization.

Programs that could be adopted by the state, or strengthened, include:

- \* Expanding state family planning programs, with a particular focus on teen pregnancy;
- \* Expanding state funding of abortion;
- \* Limiting access of illegal aliens to certain social welfare programs and other public services;
- \* Increasing the security of identification documents (California has just started issuing a fraud-resistant driver's license);
- \* Establishing an explicit state policy on population growth, with possible effects on other state policies and on public attitudes.

Federal programs that could be influenced by the state's Congressional delegation include:

- \* Expansion of federal support for family planning programs, both domestic and international;
- \* Reduction in (or curtailment of increases in) immigration to the nation;
- \* Change in national immigration law and policies to favor immigrants who wish to move to other parts of the nation.

Most people recognize that economic growth in California is a strong driving force for growth. Public policy measures that could shape this driving force include:

- \* Policies to facilitate placing existing residents in new jobs, so job increases will have the effect of reducing local unemployment rather than bringing in new migrants;
- \* A national "growth policy" to direct growth preferentially to other parts of the country;
- \* Federal, state, regional, county, or municipal policies towards job creation, in the direction of a gradual transition to a healthy but stable economy.

To these public policies should be added the many powerful actions of the private sector, which could well respond to a public consensus in favor of a stable population.

(3) SOME BELIEVE THAT WHILE THE GOAL OF SLOWING GROWTH MAY BE LEGITIMATE, THE MEANS AVAILABLE TO SLOW GROWTH ARE SO ONEROUS OR UNACCEPTABLE THAT DISCUSSION OF THE GOAL ITSELF IS TABOO.

There are people in California who fear that slowing growth means coercing people into having fewer children, either along the lines of strong social pressure for the one-child family (as in China), or making certain that the provision of family planning services is coupled with education as to the benefits of smaller families. This is not the case; the element of fertility well worth reducing is births to teenage mothers, and there are many laudable social, non-population reasons for tackling this problem.

Some fear that slowing growth means slowing immigration. It may well mean that, since the most obvious way to slow California's population growth (although not a guaranteed way) is to slow immigration to the nation.

California is the home for articulate, politically active representatives of immigrant communities, for whom discussion of immigration policy is taken very seriously and very personally. Those advocating slower population growth via slower immigration are accused of racism. This makes more difficult public discussion of even the desirability of slowing growth. For this reason, elected officials are unlikely to be leaders in discussions about reducing population growth--at least not without new, countervailing pressures from other constituents.

Representatives of all of California's diverse geographic, ethnic, racial, and religious communities need to be involved in public discussion of growth goals for each community and for the state as a whole.

Slowing the growth of the state's economy might be an effective way of slowing population growth.

Some Californians fear that slowing the economy will be chosen as the means to slow growth, and that this will create a disaster of monumental proportions for the state. Experts disagree on whether a slowdown in job increase would lead potential migrants to go elsewhere and some Californians to leave, or whether population growth would remain the same but with much higher unemployment.

Most traditional economists believe that a free market economy must grow or it will die, or even that it must grow at a certain minimum rate or will collapse. At a time when the U.S. has become the largest debtor nation in the world, when the fiscal well-being of local governments appears tied to commercial and industrial growth, it is not surprising that it is difficult to raise the possibility of slowing the rate of economic growth as a conscious policy to reduce population pressures in California.

These concerns must be addressed, and to be convincing they must be articulated by people who have some credibility on economic matters.

(4) A SUPPORTER OF STABILIZATION MAY FEAR BEING THE ONLY PERSON SPEAKING OUT ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF SLOWING POPULATION GROWTH, AND THEREBY ATTRACTING HOSTILE ATTENTION TO ONESELF.

Perhaps the most important fear among supporters of population stabilization is that if they speak out they will be vilified and have to bear it alone. Unfortunately, there is a shortage of individuals within California leadership circles who have enough interest, information, credibility, and visibility to take the risk of starting the debate over future population growth in the state.

The factors mentioned above make discussion of California's population growth difficult, but they need not make it impossible.

What is needed to begin the dialogue about California's growth is the nurturing of groups of such individuals who, by the force of their personal commitment, will start the discussion. In their hands may rest the future well-being of the state.

\* \* \* \* \*