

The eminent biologist Garrett Hardin once remarked that "no one ever dies of over population" by which he meant that there are news stories of floods and famines that take lives without mentioning how over-population figured in those disasters. David Paxson, president of World Population Balance, illustrates the point by analyzing, through the population-growth lens, one day's news stories in his home town paper. We reprint this article to call this useful literary device to your attention. Reprinted with permission of the Minneapolis-St. Paul Star-Tribune, in which it appeared on June 24, 1995.

All the News That's Fit to Print

By David Paxson

On June 11, I decided to study the *Star Tribune* to see how many articles in that Sunday's paper were about problems that have a common, fundamental cause: human population growth.

I found over 20 such stories. Leading off on page one was "Secret aid to the Serbs." Inside were other articles such as "U.S. moves to jump-start Syrian-Israeli peace talks" and "Bloodshed and grieving in South Africa."

People are often driven to war when they are too numerous for the existing resources or land. If each group in a region had only a fraction of its population or three or four times more land and resources, many territorial or ethnic disputes would not exist.

Of the nearly 5.8 billion people on the planet, 2 billion are poor. Of these, the poorest billion live in absolute poverty and misery. And that number is growing. There is a net increase of three people added to the population of the planet every second. World food harvests are not increasing that fast. Many other renewable and nonrenewable resources are declining as well. Is it any wonder that refugee numbers hit a record 23 million?

Also on page one: "Trouble in paradise," and "North shore is feeling the pressure of its popularity." Related headlines inside included: "Mushers, snowmobilers clash over shoreline trail" and "Grand Portage band of Chippewa buys Red Rock Point to ensure preservation."

Many of the problems cited in these articles would not exist if population was what it was several decades ago — or if the North Shore were five times longer. All around the world we see freedoms restricted as numbers rise and people bump into each other with increasing frequency. Our children are growing up thinking that we've always had to wait for the green light before we can get on the freeway at certain times of the day. Many people do not consider ramp meter lights progress, and population growth plays a major part in restrictions like this.

In an article on the Clinton budget, we see a government struggling to provide certain services, maintain our resource base, provide for national defense and stimulate our economy while the country's population is growing faster than that of any other

industrialized nation in the world. As people have less and less elbow room, does it affect a nation's ability to maintain basic freedoms? Certainly. We can see this phenomenon in many other countries.

"How many people can our country sustain ... without damaging the resource base faster than it can recover?"

The U.S. population is increasing by over 3 million people per year. How does this affect resources, pollution and quality of life? How many people can our country sustain over the long term without damaging the resource base faster than it can recover?

Another article was: "Conference in Minneapolis explores ways to sustain cities: 'Preserve resources for next generation,' speaker says." Will increasing human numbers in areas like the Twin Cities make it easier to preserve resources for the next generation and sustain these cities? Will it be easier to heal racial and ethnic conflict, to raise educational levels and to improve living conditions? I don't know how. Another article deals with gangs, one of many issues that are, in part, symptoms of population growing beyond the healthy and sustainable carrying capacity in a community or region.

Other articles, such as "Eagle Creek: Watershed a battleground between nature, development," deal with conservation issues. These are becoming more frequent and more severe as human numbers increase rapidly. In most of these situations, larger population results in more stress and damage to that region's natural resources and its ability to sustain so many people.

These articles are from just one daily newspaper. Although population growth is a driving factor in each of these current problems, it was not identified in any of the articles as a root cause that needs to be addressed.

Some will say that it's not population growth but poverty, or high consumption, or uneven distribution of food, or a flawed economic system, or a corrupt government or lack of opportunity. I heartily agree that each is a factor. I did not say that population growth is

the only cause. However, along with these other problems, it needs our intelligent, humane attention.

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Even if we could double food production and cut pollution in half during the next 40 years, population would double as well, leaving us with twice as many people in absolute poverty.

Some are beginning to doubt that we can even grasp the magnitude of the problem and deal with it soon enough. If we don't, population will double about every 40 years.

If we do not drastically reduce birth rates to balance with death rates, nature will step in by raising death rates. I do not think this is a humane solution. Nor do I believe that repressive measures such as abortion and infanticide, as practiced by some in China, are humane approaches to population stabilization.

Why are many Americans either unaware or doubtful that population growth is a critical problem that needs to be addressed immediately? In my speaking appearances on this subject, I find that millions in our country have heard next to nothing about this issue.

Many people have come up to me shocked at the facts I have presented. They say, "But I've heard for years that U.S. population is decreasing," or "I had no idea population is still growing so fast, let alone the negative consequences on food and resources everywhere."

I believe most Americans are ignorant about the facts because they did not hear about it in school, they see and hear almost nothing about it on television or radio, and they see little about it in articles like the ones cited above.

It is not enough that an occasional elected official understands this issue. It is not enough that there is occasional coverage in the media. This issue is highly sensitive and intertwined with many others. People in politics, education and the media must reach at least a high school level of understanding about this subject or our nation will continue down the road toward greater political, resource and social problems such as crowding, overdevelopment and pollution.

What can a concerned person do? If you own a TV station or newspaper, educate members of your staff about the realities and the magnitude of the population growth issue. When they write a story on a topic affected by population growth, make sure they clearly link the two topics. Other concerned people can make sure elected officials and educators understand.

Our collective denial of the facts reminds me of the drug-addicted person enjoying the party while denying he or she is addicted. The longer we stay "addicted" to

increasing population in a world with limited resources, the worse the problem becomes and the harder it will be to recover. ■