

The Politics of Population

An Earth Day report for Public Radio

by Anna Solomon-Greenbaum

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CURWOOD: Back in 1970, population control was a popular topic in speeches on the first Earth Day. After all, scientist Paul Ehrlich had just published his groundbreaking book, *The Population Bomb*. And the group Zero Population Growth, which linked population to environmental degradation, had just been formed. But over the years, the issue of population has almost disappeared from the agenda of many environmental groups. *Living on Earth's* Anna Solomon-Greenbaum explains why that might be.

SOLOMON-GREENBAUM: On Earth Day this year, leaders of some of the nation's leading environmental groups held a press conference in Washington. This group of suit-clad, mostly white male activists talked about a range of tangible and, some would argue, donation-friendly issues, from wilderness protection to super-fun

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clean-ups. The one thing they didn't talk about was population. That chore was left to the gray-haired founder of Earth Day, Gaylord Nelson, who brought up the subject at the National Press Club.

NELSON: The ultimate key to sustainability is population. When I was born in 1916, the population of the United States was 98 million.

SOLOMON-GREENBAUM: That number today is almost 300 million. And even though fertility rates here are almost low enough to stabilize the population, it's expected to nearly double over the next century. That projected growth is largely due to immigrants and their children. And that may be why most major environmental groups tend to avoid the topic.

CHRISTIAN: When you start to talk about immigration policy, reducing the level of immigration or stabilizing U.S. population, you're accused of racism, elitism.

SOLOMON-GREENBAUM: Johnette Christian is founder of Mainers for Immigration Reform.

CHRISTIAN: You're accused of xenophobia, nativism. These are all the words that we use to silence any discussion around stabilizing our population and reducing immigration.

SOLOMON-GREENBAUM:

Consider what happened in 1998 when some Sierra Club members called for a vote on whether the group should lobby to reduce the number of immigrants allowed into the U.S. every year. Harry Pachon, president of the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, a think-tank focused on Latino issues, says Latinos and environmentalists could be natural allies. But the Sierra Club vote challenged that relationship.

PACHON: I think it really raised some eyebrows. It was as if, you too are joining the fray against the Hispanic community. Because you have to take the context of the period in which the vote was taken. It came within four years of Proposition 187, the restriction on immigrant assistance. And the whole tenor of the time was anti-immigrant rhetoric and immigrant bashing, per se.

SOLOMON-GREENBAUM: The Sierra Club measure to cut immigration was eventually voted down. Still, almost 40 percent of Sierra Club members voted for tighter restrictions on immigration, including some heavy weight environmental thinkers like Gaylord Nelson, E.O. Wilson, and Lester Brown, founder of the WorldWatch Institute. Cut away the rhetoric, says Brown, and the fact is more people use more resources and

produce more waste. Unless population is stabilized, he says, ecosystems won't survive.

BROWN: I think systems are going to be breaking down because of water shortages, severe water shortages. And if we look into future water shortages, we're probably also looking into future food shortages.

SOLOMON-GREENBAUM: However uncomfortable, Brown says, today's environmental activists need to face the issues of population and immigration at home, and call for a national policy that sets limits on growth.

BROWN: If we had one, then I think it would enable us to think a bit more rationally and a bit less emotionally about some of these issues.

SOLOMON-GREENBAUM: But that's a slippery political tightrope for today's environmental leaders to walk. Vicky Markham directs the Center for Environment and Policy. Not only is immigration a touchy topic, but also Markham, who's coordinating a state-by-state study on the population/ environment equation, says the data simply isn't in yet on whether immigrants are having a negative impact on the environment.

MARKHAM: In my view, there is no good, solid body of evidence that's backed up by research, the data, or the analysis to clearly demonstrate links. So, they would be going out on a limb, for which they could be attacked.

SOLOMON-GREENBAUM: Annette Souder of the Sierra Club says there's another problem if

environmental groups equate immigration with environment degradation. They ignore another sensitive subject, the responsibility current U.S. citizens must accept for over-consuming.

SOUDER: We need to think about the fact we are five percent of the world's population in the United States, and we consume 25 percent of the world's resources right now.

SOLOMON-GREENBAUM: There's almost a sort of generation gap between the 1970s first wave environmentalists who see over-population primarily as a problem of statistics, and current spokespeople who know that race, ethnicity, and class are specters that can't be avoided in any discussion of the topic today. Bob Engleman, with Population Action International, falls somewhere between the two groups. He says the key to bridging the gap lies in finding a new way to frame the conversation.

ENGLEMAN: The new generation, the new leaders in the environmental field are going to find they really don't have any choice but to take these issues on and to try to frame them in terms that people can relate to, terms like, what is fair? What is inclusive and not exclusive? What doesn't demonize one group of people or make another group seem to be really good actors, when we're all in this together.

SOLOMON-GREENBAUM: Engleman was disappointed at the 2002 Summit on Sustainable Development to see the population issue reduced to what he describes as, "sideshowes at the circus." That was in contrast to the first Summit

in 1992, when an entire chapter was devoted to population and the environment. But Engleman envisions a shift back.

ENGLEMAN: There will be a need in the next few years as population continues to grow, as it continues to be more evident in a number of debates, particularly water, access to fresh water, climate, and the loss of biodiversity. It's going to be increasingly obvious to people who are paying attention to these issues how important population is.

SOLOMON-GREENBAUM: While the environmental community decides how to address immigration and population, other groups are moving on the issue and using the environment as a talking point. In February, Republican Congressman Tom Tancredo, introduced a bill to sharply cut immigration. A major reason, he says: curbing sprawl.

For "Living on Earth," I'm Anna Solomon-Greenbaum in Washington. •