

Harold Gilliam has been an environmental writer for the San Francisco Chronicle for 30 years and has written several books on environmental topics. This feature appeared in the "This World" section of the Chronicle on February 21, 1993.

Bursting at the Seams

By Harold Gilliam

The saga of Zoe Baird has focused attention on immigration, but the hullabaloo about the hiring of illegal aliens for domestic work is diverting us from a far more critical matter: the overwhelming impact of immigration on population growth.

Consider Governor Pete Wilson's recent report that the people flowing into the state, both legally and illegally, are costing Californians more than \$1 billion at a time of fiscal desperation and 10 percent unemployment.

The time has come to risk being politically incorrect, to take off the blindfolds, to think the unthinkable and speak the unspeakable: There are too many people coming into California. Immigration must stop.

As a result of immigration, the state's population has been increasing at the rate of 700,000 a year, equivalent to 10 more San Franciscos every decade. This is one of the biggest migrations in history, and if it continues, the state is likely to go broke and suffer a steadily declining standard of living.

Yet no one in authority has been able to confront publicly the fact that population growth, in this state as well as on the planet, cannot go on forever. It will come to an end either by conscious control or by catastrophe.

There are now about 1.3 million undocumented or illegal immigrants in California and more than 6 million legals. Many who entered illegally were granted amnesty by the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986.

Their children are in a school system bursting at the seams; California's educational system has slid from top among the states to the bottom. (The decline started with Proposition 13 — long before the avalanche of immigration reached its present proportions — which resulted in decreasing expenditures per student.)

In some school districts, two-thirds or more of the students cannot read or speak adequate English to absorb what they are supposed to learn. How can education of other students take place under these circumstances?

All students now in the schools, the children of immigrants as well as non-immigrants, deserve the best education the state can give them. As Terri Lobdell and Lewis Butler of the nonprofit educational organization California Tomorrow point out: "The cost of educating these students is primarily an investment in human capital. If properly nurtured and

educated, these young people are the workers, producers and taxpayers of tomorrow. They will be supporting the taxpayers of today (including massive numbers of baby boomers) in their old age." But quality education does not seem possible if schools are swamped by illegal immigrants coming across the borders and being smuggled from overseas by the boatload at the rate of about 100,000 a year. And there are twice that many incoming *legal* immigrants.

Further immigration at this rate will place an intolerable strain not only on California's school system but on its water supply, soil productivity, health services and taxpayers' ability to pay.

Wilson reports that Medi-Cal health care for people who entered illegally (but may now be legal) costs the state \$534 million a year. AFDC (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) for children of illegals costs \$278 million. Illegals in California prisons cost the state \$250 million. These and other costs add up to \$1.4 billion per year, the governor reports.

Wilson wants to bill the federal government for that amount, the cost to the state resulting from the federal government's misleadingly named Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. But by far the largest share of the immigration costs — for education — must be paid by Californians, since states traditionally bear the expenses of schools. Immigrant children and the California-born children of immigrants number in the hundreds of thousands at an annual cost of \$4,000 to \$5,000 per student.

Figures on what the immigrants cost the state are ball-park statistics only; they do not take into account the amounts paid by immigrants in taxes (most of the taxes go to the federal government, not the state). Many immigrants are self-supporting and add to California's productivity and tax revenues.

But to admit more legals and illegals by the hundreds of thousands — at a time when the state has lost 800,000 jobs and one in ten workers is unemployed — is hardly the wisest policy.

We cannot deny health care, education and other services to those who are already here. But the state cannot afford to watch its costs rise indefinitely to pay for further waves of immigrants overwhelming our social systems and infrastructure.

It is time to consider a moratorium on immigration until we have provided a lamentably lacking element in our governance — a population policy. We need to determine the carrying capacity of the state.

Fiscal problems aside, how many people can our dwindling natural resources support at a reasonable standard of living?

Consider water, for example. As we have learned recently, the filling of the reservoirs by this year's rains will not solve the long-term water shortage. Even with reservoirs at capacity there is not enough water to satisfy present demands, much less an unending demand for more. The population grows; the water supply does not. And tree rings tell us that previous droughts have lasted much longer than the recent ones.

How can we increase the supply of water to keep up with the growing demand? The major dam sites are already occupied, except for the proposed Auburn Dam on the American River above Sacramento, which has been stalled primarily for seismic and environmental reasons.

Do we import water from the Columbia, from the Yukon, from the Mississippi? Will the residents of those regions willingly part with their water? Can we afford the costs? Do we desalt sea water at an astronomical expense in dollars and energy?

Conservation of water can extend existing supplies, but you can only tighten the belt up to a point. A continually growing population will overtake all efforts at conservation.

Another declining resource is topsoil. Already the exploding population has taken over hundreds of thousands of food-growing acres as cities cover the countryside. A few decades ago Los Angeles County was the top agricultural county in the United States; the sprawling city has long since preempted the available topsoil. Where once there were miles of orange groves beneath snowy mountains, there are now miles of besmogged suburbs, and the mountains are seldom visible.

Central Valley cities are Los Angelizing. From Bakersfield to Fresno to Sacramento and beyond, countless acres of priceless topsoil have been urbanized and removed from food production by the booming population.

During the 1980s, about 30 percent of the people moving to California were from other states. This number has diminished, and more people are currently moving to other states than are entering, resulting in a net outflow of about 41,000 a year.

"...most of the births that increase the population are attributable to immigration."

Half of the state's population increase comes from net births (the excess of births over deaths). But most of the births that increase the population are attributable to immigration.

Among non-immigrant Californians, the average

birthrate in the past decade has been near the replacement level — two children per couple. Immigrants tend to have much larger families, running in some groups close to double that number.

After they have been in California for a generation or two, their birthrate declines, but meanwhile large families immigrate, swelling the population further. The implications are that without further immigration, California's population would approach stability at slightly above the current level.

Demographers tell us that at current rates of increase, the state's population is projected to rise from 31 million (10 times as many as were in the state when members of today's older generation were born) to 40 to 50 million in the next 25 years. (For detailed population statistics, see *Fifty Million Californians?* by Leon Bouvier, published by the Center for Immigration Studies, 1815 H Street, NW, Suite 1010, Washington, DC 20006; \$9.95).

At these rates, in the lifetimes of today's kindergartners, California would have a population of 80 million to 120 million — all with no consideration, so far, of how many people the state can physically support. If we are having a hard time supporting the present number, in terms of both finances and resources, how can we keep quiet when confronted with projections of a population several times larger?

The answer to that one is easy. We are keeping quiet because we are afraid of being accused of racism. Most of the future immigrants would be Hispanics and Asians.

As an Anglo, I have compunctions about closing the door on more immigrants, most of whom would be non-Anglo. Being anti-immigration is to risk being classified with "hate groups," despite the fact that I believe in racial and cultural diversity and their benefits to America.

But those benefits will continue with the ethnic and cultural diversity that exists now. Immigrants now in this country have a strong stake in minimizing further immigration, which increases job competition in a shaky economy. A recent Latino National Political Survey poll found that 79 percent of Mexican-born U.S. residents believe there are too many immigrants crossing the borders, and a Wall Street Journal-NBC poll found that 71 percent of the general public feels the same way.

There are undoubtedly bigots who want immigration stopped for racial reasons. They would make the immigrants who are here now scapegoats for all of California's problems. But opposition to racial bigotry should not blind us to the facts: There are limits to population size, in a theater or in a state, in a phone booth or on the planet.

We are all descendants of immigrants (even Native Americans' ancestors migrated from Asia, according to anthropologists). No one with an ounce

of compassion can avoid feeling sympathy for potential immigrants who would come to this country, as our ancestors did, to find a better life for themselves and their families.

But we need to ask whether we can solve the problems of all the overpopulated, underdeveloped countries of the Earth by keeping our borders open to unending waves of newcomers and by supporting them and their children with schooling and health services after they get here, considering our declining resources of water and air, topsoil and forests.

We might like to do so if we could, but the law of limits suggests otherwise.

The best way for the U.S. to help those countries is by supplying them with population planning assistance on request, by increasing support for the United Nations' family-planning program, by providing public and private technical help that enables them to increase their own means of earning a living (such as by sustainable agricultural practices) as we simultaneously set an example in the United States by reducing our own prodigal waste of resources.

***"...a moratorium on immigration
seems imperative."***

Legal immigration to the U.S. can be halted by Congress, if enough members of that estimable body can overcome fears of being labeled "racist."

There are no easy ways to stop the illegal immigrants from coming. No matter how tightly we try to seal the borders, there will always be leaks. All we can do is give the border patrol and the Coast Guard whatever they need to keep leaks to a minimum. The cost would probably be far less than the fiscal and environmental costs that would be incurred by future immigrants.

Exceptions should be made for political refugees facing persecution at home. But this country cannot absorb them all; we need to persuade other nations to accept their share, particularly countries that share the same language as the refugees.

In any case, the heart of the matter is not racism or immigration, it is population: how many people can California support with our limited resources? We may have already exceeded the permanent sustainable carrying capacity of the state.

Until we have a population policy that addresses limits to growth and determines what a sustainable population would be, a moratorium on immigration seems imperative.

Obviously the problem is complex, and there are many pros and cons, but nothing can be gained by denying that it exists. We will jeopardize the future of our children and our country if we continue to keep our eyes closed. ■