

*The concept of 'carrying capacity' resurfaces periodically as a tool for conceptualizing mankind's situation, and helping to plan a course of action. Washington editor Roy Beck reports on the National Carrying Capacity Issues Conference.*

# Issues of Carrying Capacity

Reportage by Roy Beck

What might it take finally to *reconnect* the environmental movement to the campaign for U.S. population stabilization, formerly one of the movement's most important goals?

A conference at Georgetown University last summer provided a fascinating model for what could happen. It engendered tensions, but also hope. By focusing environmentalists on the concepts of "carrying capacity" and "sustainable economy" for the United States, frank talk about U.S. population growth *and* immigration policy emerged. And a remarkable result it was to have environmentalists talking about either issue! Since the late '70s, American environmental groups have neglected and sometimes totally ignored the multiplying effect of population growth on domestic environmental problems. The nadir came in 1990, when all but one environmental group ignored legislation that spurred major additional population growth.

"Carrying capacity is the most important issue of our time," Brock Evans, Washington lobbyist for the Audubon Society, told some 200 environmental professionals, activists, academics and interested citizens at the National Carrying Capacity Issues Conference. Because of the United States' size (50 million more people than in 1970) and per capita consumption, "we are destroying forests faster than Brazil," he said. "I hope the future will be a little more benign. My job is to hold the door open and preserve every little bit I can." Evans told how when he ran for Congress from Seattle in 1984 he had to defend his stands on immigration and family planning because critics didn't understand carrying capacity principles.

Former U.S. Sen. Gaylord Nelson, now of the Wilderness Society, said in his keynote address that the *disconnection* between environmentalists and population stabilization has occurred primarily "due to lack of attention to the concept of carrying capacity."

The definition of "carrying capacity" — according to the conference sponsor, Carrying Capacity Network — is "the number of individuals who can be supported without degrading the natural, cultural and social environment, i.e., without reducing the ability of the environment to sustain the desired quality of life over the long term."

Nelson criticized Congress and President Bush for failing even to mention population questions when they approved 1990 immigration legislation that will increase U.S. population by millions over the next

decade. "From July of 1989 to October of 1990, there were thousands of words of debate in the Congressional Record. Yet, in scanning, I found only one brief reference to carrying capacity."

But then why would Congress talk about an issue the environmental community scarcely raised? Only one conservation group in the entire nation spoke up for the environment and tried to get Congress to consider the carrying capacity implications of the immigration bill. And that group — Population-Environment Balance — also was the only one to oppose the population-growth legislation. (The Federation for American Immigration Reform, with a number of environmentalists in its leadership, also was a vocal opponent.)

Former U.S. Rep. Claudine Schneider, now of the environmentally oriented Artemis Project, told the conference that despite her strong conservation credentials during 10 years in the House, it was only in 1990 that she began really to grasp the connection between immigration and environment.

"Immigration clearly is an area that needs to be looked at," Schneider said, noting that changing the 1990 immigration law would enable the country to move toward quality rather than quantity. "It shocked me (during debate of the 1990 bill) that nobody in a decision-making capacity was willing to talk about population issues."

Rose Hanes, executive director of Population-Environment Balance, said, "We believe population growth is the ultimate environmental threat. I'm always surprised to find any disagreement. We believe the U.S. is the most overpopulated in the world."

And the majority of U.S. growth since 1970 has been due to immigration, according to a study done for *The Social Contract* by demographer Leon Bouvier, who also was on the program.<sup>1</sup>

Frank Morris, dean of graduate research at Morgan State University, emphasized that a person or group cannot deal responsibly with population, environment or immigration without dealing with all of them. "You can't do it in isolation."

Not everybody at the conference was ready for such integration of issues. Several of the speakers and workshop leaders restricted their comments to more narrowly defined topics related to carrying capacity. Some told me privately that they had not previously been forced to think about all the issues together. While they did not object to the conclusions of people

like Nelson, they were still mulling them over and not yet ready to espouse such views themselves.

---

***"...the rare public official...who challenges massive immigration is the person showing real concern for poor Americans while the pro-immigration advocates push for policies that actually aid rich Americans."***

---

The same feelings could be found among a number of participants who suddenly found their environmentalism challenged with new, uncomfortable issues.

For others, the drumbeat of immigration comments from speakers was too jarring. One participant took the floor microphone and complained, "I'd like to see this conference not restrict itself to restrictive immigration laws." It was seen as ironic, if not hypocritical, that Audubon's Evans had used the image of the open door concerning saving natural resources while he and others indicated the need to close the door on immigration.

For some in attendance, the only proper answer is to reduce American consumption and standard of living to make room for those around the world who would like to move here. Writer Elizabeth Sobo found talk of immigration restriction and population stabilization to be mean-spirited and driven by ethnic and religious bigotry. In an article in the National Catholic Register entitled "And the poor shall inherit a kick in the head," Sobo described the conference as an effort to protect the lifestyles of wealthy Anglo-Saxons. Her sense of the immorality of population stabilization efforts was colorfully expressed in closing lines about U.S. Rep. Tony Beilenson. The Beverly Hills Democrat had co-sponsored legislation that would withdraw automatic citizenship to babies born of illegal aliens. Sobo wrote:

*Beilenson is a man who understands 'overpopulation.' He comes from a district in which two, three, or even four people are sometimes crowded into one 20-room mansion. He's seen what happens when half a dozen people are forced to share a single swimming pool, and undoubtedly he knows others who have no tennis court at all. And surely the good people of Beverly Hills who helped elect Beilenson will sleep better in the future knowing that a shiftless bunch of Mexican babies in Texas can no longer get free milk from the WIC program.*

Although the National Catholic Register article did not exhibit much interest in environmental concerns, it showed clearly why many

environmentalists have been loath to deal with population and carrying capacity issues: fear of having environmental efforts associated with issues tarred with charges of ethnic and racial insensitivity, callousness toward poor people, and other accusations of social immorality.

But several speakers made their case that environmentalists are racially insensitive if they *refuse* to deal with population and immigration issues. They contended that the rare elected official like Rep. Beilenson who challenges massive immigration is the person showing real concern for poor Americans while the pro-immigration advocates push for policies that actually aid rich Americans.

Beilenson said in a conference workshop that talk of stopping illegal immigration in Southern California was almost entirely a racist kind of issue several years ago. And it still can be. "But that shouldn't chase away decent people. It makes it even more necessary for really good people to get involved so it isn't left just to the racists." As a liberal Democrat, he said, he has spoken against illegal immigration for eight or nine years because of its impact on population and environment. In the last two years, he said, there has been a dramatic change in discussion of illegal immigration because masses of citizens have begun to make the connection between it and quality of life — on the freeways and beaches, in jobs and, most importantly, in public services.

Immigration policies designed to bring a million or more new entrants a year, legal and illegal, are exceeding not only the environmental but the cultural and social carrying capacity of the nation, particularly in regard to lower-skilled Americans, several speakers said.

"Higher-income Americans are benefitting temporarily from the low-wage labor market's being in chaos," said labor economist Vernon Briggs of Cornell University. That chaos — which includes declining wages for 70 percent of Americans — is caused by profound structural changes in the economy and by two decades of unending massive immigration, Briggs said. "One group in the United States — blacks — clearly are having an awful time making the transition. We're at a break point on race issues. The No. 1 labor force issue is the status of black labor. The test of every labor action must be that it does no harm to the status of black Americans."

This gives environmentalists — who long have suffered under pejorative images of being white elitists — a unique opportunity to embrace a course of action beneficial equally to the quality of the natural environment and to economic conditions for blacks.

Prof. Morris, former executive of the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation, appealed to environmentalists to assist African-Americans, especially when it is mutually beneficial. One key way is by working to restrict immigration and, thus, to stabilize the population. Morris addressed the 1990

immigration law with its dire consequences for the environment. He said it also contained harsh consequences for blacks: "A major factor behind that law was that it came after a report showed a tight labor market would force companies to hire and train more blacks." Congress immediately moved to loosen the labor market with more foreign workers. "The unconscious motive of immigration law always has been to reduce the ratio of blacks." One in five Americans was black in 1776, compared to one in eight at present. "New immigrants are in direct competition with African-Americans. They displace jobs and wages."

Referring to the outbreak of riots in Los Angeles, Morris said: "If all Americans were paying the price for immigration that African-Americans are, there would be a lot more attention to the issue and a lot more violence against immigrants."

"It's very silly to take more people into a nation as long as we don't take care of those here," said famed environmental author Garrett Hardin. "I think we're insane to take in any immigrants at all."

Herman Daly, World Bank economist and father of steady-state economics, added: "As long as there is an unlimited supply of unskilled labor, it is hard to raise income and the standard of living." Allowing more overpopulation in the United States shows an irresponsibility toward the rest of the world, he said. "If the U.S. had worried about its own carrying capacity, it wouldn't have developed to where we depend so much on depleting the carrying capacity of other nations."

The reason so many nations have been able to exceed their carrying capacity is that they are "drawing down their resource stocks," Daly said. And that violates the most sacred tenet of capitalism: that you do not consume capital to pay operating costs, he added. Sir John Hicks, the Nobel economist, defined income in carrying capacity terms. Daly noted: "Income is what you can take without cutting the ability to earn the same income the next period and the periods after that."

Nelson advised the conference that it is good and right to concentrate on one's own nation and its carrying capacity: "While we have a responsibility to provide vigorous international leadership, there are important, unfinished environment challenges here at home ... Sovereign nations are no different from corporations. No corporation that used up its capital survived bankruptcy." Population growth is the No. 1 environmental problem, he said. And it is also a social problem: "Does anybody believe New York, Chicago and Miami are better than when they were half the size, or will be better when doubled?" He castigated the news media, nearly all of which he said supported expanding immigration while paying no attention "to this central issue of our time — resource depletion."

A long list of speakers detailed the depletion in a number of categories. For example, the United States

loses 1.5 million acres of top soil a year, according to James Riggle of American Farmland Trust. "The reason so many environmentalists came was to deal with questions about our limits," said David Durham, president of Carrying Capacity Network. "What population-size in the Southwest will water sustain? The overarching purpose of the conference was the show the interrelationships among all the resource issues and population size. There is a value question here, too. It is not just how many people you can pack into an area, but whether you want wilderness and other qualities of life for the people there." Although the conference sponsors strongly support recycling, reduced energy use, and lower consumption of other resources, they do not advocate that Americans should forever reduce their quality of living simply to make room for as many people as possible.

The sight of so many figures prominent in the environmental movement talking easily, knowledgeably and forcefully about population and immigration at the June 19-21 conference lent a sense of comfort about the issues that some participants had not previously experienced. And the carrying capacity framework of the discussions was one that nobody contested.

Clearly, having Nelson — the father of the first Earth Day 1970 — embrace the need for population stabilization and immigration restriction was a reminder that population and environment were inextricably intertwined in the movement not so very long ago. ■

<sup>1</sup> Leon Bouvier's study of the contribution of immigration to population growth is presented in the article, "Immigration: No. 1 in U.S. Growth" by Roy Beck and can be found in the Winter 1991-92 issue of *The Social Contract*, Volume II, Number 2, page 106.

[Audio tapes of the conference speeches and workshops can be purchased from Carrying Capacity Network. The order sheet is available by calling 1-800-466-4866 or by writing to Suite 1003, 1325 "G" Street, NW, Washington, DC 20005-3104.]