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A Note from the Editor

*How many Americans can we sustain...
and with what standard of living?*

Ten years ago, Negative Population Growth asked a panel of specialists if the United States population had grown too large and, if so, could an optimum population size be identified and achieved? NPG further asked for suggestions on how to confront the existing problems facing our country.

Some answers to these questions were published in a book, *Elephants in the Volkswagen: Facing the Tough Questions About Our Overcrowded Country* (New York & Oxford: W. H. Freeman, 272 pp., 1992) edited by Lindsey Grant, a former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Environmental & Population Affairs. After exploring the concept of optimum population – a term coined by Sir Julian Huxley – the first paper in the symposium was, “Land, Energy & Water: Constraints Governing Ideal U.S. Population Size,” by David and Marcia Pimentel. This is an essay that has haunted my thinking about population-related issues ever since I first read it. After examining how our environment has been degraded and nonrenewable resources consumed, they came to the conclusion that current standards of prosperity could not be sustained in the future without a major reduction in U.S. population size:

If the U.S. population wishes to continue to enjoy its current high level of energy use and standard of living and prosperity, its ideal population should be between forty and one hundred million people. With sound energy conservation practices and a drastic reduction of energy use per capita to less than one-half current usage, it might be possible to support the current population. One choice requires a significantly lower population level and the other results in a dramatic reduction in the standard of living because of the resource needs of the larger population.

At present levels of fertility and migration, the U.S. population will rise by more than one-half by 2050... Comparisons to China clearly show why the U. S. will be unable to maintain its current level of prosperity and high standard of living, which are based on its adequate fertile land, water, energy, and biological resources.... If the current population level is sustained, a drastic reduction in standards of living will follow.

If the Pimentels are right – and I have seen no convincing argument that they are not – then we should be working to make the transformation to a smaller U.S. population. This would include an end to mass immigration. In answer to the question: How many people should we admit each year? I often turn to Garrett Hardin’s reply:

I know of no thoughtful person who would (if he could) stop all immigration. The benefits of variety, of periodic fresh infusions of new peoples and new ideas are real. No adventurous, lively nation wants to forgo them. But how many immigrants are needed to secure these benefits? A thousand per year? Ten thousand? Surely no more.

(G. Hardin, “Smokescreens and Evasions,” in *Naked Emperors: Essays of a Taboo-Stalker*. Los Altos, CA: William Kaufmann, Inc., 1982.)

In this issue we are pleased to include an interview with Professor Pimentel and key essays by David and Marcia Pimentel. Special thanks go to Lindsey Grant for helping organize this feature, as well as to John Rohe for conducting the interview.

WAYNE LUTTON, PH.D.

Editor