

Will the Ecological Society of America Bite the Population Bullet?

By **STUART H. HURLBERT**

[AUTHOR’S NOTE: This letter was posted on May 17, 2007, on the Ecological Society of America (ESA)’s blog *Ecotone*. It is available at: <http://www.esa.org/esablog/ecology-and-society/will-the-ecological-society-of-america-bite-the-population-bullet/> The letter was prompted by the ESA *Action Alert* of May 11, 2007, which encouraged our members to urge Congress to provide good funding for science and education in the 2008 federal budget.]

Dear Nadine and Members of the ESA Governing Board,

These types of alerts always provoke the same reaction from me. It is reasonable for us to look after our own self-interest as ecological researchers always needing a generous flow of dollars to support our projects, students, travel, and so on.

But we also have an obligation, both as individuals and as an organization, to look beyond our narrow self-interests and, when necessary, take stands and undertake initiatives for the broader benefit of society when there may be no direct benefit to ourselves. We should be *especially* willing to do this when controversial matters are at stake about which few other organizations are likely to have the political courage to speak out.


It was about 15 years ago that I first suggested to the ESA leadership, via Gordon Orians, that it commission a white paper on U.S. population growth, its causes, and its likely environmental consequences. This was a time when rates of immigration into the U.S. already

had increased several fold as a consequence of “liberalized” immigration laws passed by the U.S. Congress in 1965 and a large amnesty program passed in 1986.

The ESA leadership was not interested. *The Sustainable Biosphere Initiative* — another request for funds for ourselves — was fine, but the ESA did not wish to interfere with politicians trying to increase the population growth rate of the U.S.!

In May 2006, the U.S. Senate passed S.2611. This would have tripled immigration rates and increased the overall rate of U.S. population growth from about 0.9 percent per year (current) to an estimated 1.9 percent per year, leading to an estimated U.S. population of ca. 500,200,000 by mid-century.

This would have been the most environmentally disastrous legislation since the 1965 immigration legisla-

 tion that opened the floodgates. Ninety percent of the Democratic senators and 42 percent of the Republican senators voted for S.2611. It would now be law of the land had there not been strong Republican opposition in the House of Representatives. (You must take your friends where you find them!).

During the entire debate over this horrendous bill there was not a single peep from mainline environmental NGOs or from any professional society of environmental scientists. Their directorates had all headed for the hills with their tails between their legs, the Sierra Club national board leading the way.

Now the Senate is considering this bill again (renumbered as S.1348). It may vote on it as soon as this week or next [as of this issue, comprehensive immigration reform is still in contention]. Once again its demographic and environmental consequences are not even being discussed by the Senate or the House of Representatives. And once again the reason is that the main *puta-*

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tive defenders of the environment — ESA, Sierra Club, etc. — have been timid and silent.

So, this letter is to repeat my suggestion of 15 years ago and to see whether the ESA Public Affairs office and current Governing Board are willing to take action.

Does the new generation have more “moxie” than the old?! Or is everybody still content for ESA to remain “politically correct,” silent, and thus a *de facto* supporter of those powerful factions in Congress intent on doubling our rate of population growth?

Are we willing to be politically active only in our own financial self-interest? If so, how do we differ from the building contractors associations, chambers of commerce, lumber companies, oil companies, and others we sometimes smugly demonize?

Ecologist, heal thyself!

There is plenty of intellectual and ethical back-up for taking a firm stand against *any* immigration legislation that will increase the rate of U.S. population growth and for taking firm stands in favor of legislation and policies that will lead to U.S. population stabilization as soon as feasible.

ESA would be taking the side of many of the greats of the past.

The late Sen. Gaylord Nelson, Founder of Earth Day, said in 2001, “*In this country, it’s phony for anyone to say they are for the environment but not for limiting immigration.*”

The late Prof. Garrett Hardin, early and courageous writer on population issues, wrote in 1989 that:

We are not faced with a single global population problem but, rather, with about 180 sep-

arate national population problems. All population controls must be applied locally; local governments are the agents best prepared to choose local means. Means must fit local traditions. For one nation to attempt to impose its ethical principles on another is to violate national sovereignty and endanger international peace. The only legitimate demand that nations can make on one another is this: ‘Don’t try to solve your population problem by exporting your excess people to us.’ All nations should take this position, and most do. Unfortunately, many Americans seem to believe that our nation can solve everyone else’s population problems.

Additional reading? A short piece along these same lines — *The Globalist Copout*, published in 2000 — contained my first public challenge to ESA on this issue (at <http://www.thesocialcontract.com/cgi-bin/showarticle.pl?articleID=672&terms=>). A recent analysis titled *Environmental Voting Records of Members of the U.S. Congress, 2006* will shed further surprising light on who is working with us and who against us (at <http://www.sci.sdsu.edu/salton/CEV2006.pdf>). And for historical understanding, nothing beats *The Environmental Movement’s Retreat from Advocating U.S. Population Stabilization (1970-1998)* (at http://www.numbersusa.com/about/bk_retreat.html). Estimates of population growth to 2050 under different immigration legislation options are given in *Projecting the U.S. Population to 2050: Four Immigration Scenarios* (at http://www.fairus.org/site/DocServer/pop_projections.pdf?docID=901) ■



The late Gaylord Nelson (left), the principal founder of Earth Day, served as the 35th Governor of Wisconsin (1958-1962) and U.S. Senator from Wisconsin (1963-1981). In an interview with the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, April 22, 2001, Nelson said, “The bigger the population gets, the more serious the problems become.... We have to address the population issue. The United Nations, with the U.S. supporting it, took the position in Cairo in 1994 that every country was responsible for stabilizing its own population. It can be done. But in this country, it’s phony to say, ‘I’m for the environment but not for limiting immigration.’”