

Frontiers, Immigration, and Political Censorship

By Stuart H. Hurlbert

Among scientists in academia, government agencies and the private sector, there is a widespread and well-justified hostility to governmental censorship of scientific fact and opinion. As practiced during the G.W. Bush administration, that has been well documented in Chris Mooney's (2005) book *The Republican War on Science*. It is not in any way partisan to note that indeed the "big tent" of the Republican Party has always welcomed individuals with strong anti-science biases.

But the pot cannot be calling the kettle black. Once an environmental scientist starts putting forward fact or opinion on certain controversial matters that ideologues want kept off the table, he often finds himself blocked by scientist censors every bit as ruthless as some Bush-trained redactor. Immigration, population growth, environmental degradation, and their connections comprise one such area of controversy that bears heavily on the future of the U.S. and the planet.

In academia, these issues would be expected to be treated in some objective manner in the popular "environment and man" courses found on every university campus nowadays. While those courses almost always do talk in very general terms about the effects of past, present, and future population levels on wildlife, pollution, and other aspects of the environment, they typically give no or only distorted information about the relationship between immigration and U.S. population growth. The textbooks most commonly used are shy on the topic. Most instructors also prefer to talk about population growth as solely a global issue. Don't overburden the poor students with information that might make them concerned about the environmental consequences of mass overimmigration into the U.S.!

Stuart H. Hurlbert is an emeritus professor of biology at San Diego State University and is currently secretary of Californians for Population Stabilization. Contact: shurlbert@sunstroke.sdsu.edu

Off campus, scientists function mainly by way of their scientific societies and the meetings and journals these sponsor. In the environmental sciences, many journals accept articles or opinion pieces, or have entire sections dedicated to examination of the relevance of technical knowledge to policy development, analysis, and implementation.

Oops, we invited the wrong guy

Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment is published by the *Ecological Society of America (ESA)* and is one of the most widely read and circulated journals in the environmental sciences. In the summer of 2008, the editors of *Frontiers* invited me to submit an essay that responded to the question:

Are increased attempts to control immigration from Mexico (including building fences and increasing militarization of the border) likely to have a net positive, negative, or neutral effect on biodiversity in the U.S. and Mexico?

Another person, Guy McPherson, was being invited, I was told, to present a different perspective.

It was a pleasant shock to receive the invitation. For a couple of decades I had witnessed too many successful attempts by too many of my fellow academics and environmentalists to keep off the table open discussion of immigration-population-environment connections as they apply to the U.S. (Hurlbert 2000, 2011a). What had happened? Were new folks in charge? Unfortunately not, as it turned out. It was just the same old folks making a "mistake."

At the request of the editors of *Frontiers*, an introduction to and brief literature review on the topic was prepared by Lori Hiding of Arizona State University. This was to serve as a foundation for our essays and preclude the need for extensive literature reviews of our own.

My essay was submitted in November 2008, and after some shortening, was accepted by *Frontiers* Asso-

ciate Editor Peter Mooreside. On February 18, 2009, Editor Mooreside informed me that publication was being delayed so essays could be solicited from two additional persons “to provide a broader view of the subject.” Then a long silence. On June 22, 2009, I was informed by Editor Mooreside that the editors “decided to delay the continuation of this piece for now” because “one of the authors has apparently withdrawn” and because they had a “backlog of regular mss.”

On July 8, 2009, in response to a query from myself, Editor Sue Silver assured me that “there is no politically motivated censorship involved here whatsoever — the *Frontiers* office quite simply dropped the ball. We made some unfortunate but unintentional errors and I apologize for them... we will be publishing the entire set of essays.”

Backtracking, disingenuity, and cowardice

Then on July 23, 2009, I was informed by Editor Silver that she was reneging on that commitment on the grounds that my essay was “too heavily political for *Frontiers*...[and] should have been more grounded in science, and more focused on the original question — the effects of the border fence on biodiversity.” No specifics were given, no criticism of any sentence or paragraph in my essay, no suggestion that any fact was incorrect or irrelevant or any point poorly argued. Hidingen’s (2009) introduction to the topic would be published by itself, Editor Silver stated, and then was.



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The disingenuousness of Editor Silver’s pretext for censorship was astounding. First, why had this decision not been made as soon as my essay was received and reviewed almost a year earlier? Second, my charge was not to consider just effects of the “fence,” as Editor Silver now claimed, but rather to consider effects of im-

plicitly all “increased attempts to control immigration.” Third, I was asked to consider effects on biodiversity “in U.S. and Mexico,” not just those effects on biodiversity in the border region. Fourth, if political discussion is taboo, then *Frontiers* shouldn’t ask scientists to respond to questions about relations between immigration and environmental issues. If *Frontiers* can’t take the heat, it should “get out of the kitchen” — and on the matters of immigration, U.S. population growth, and environmental degradation, the ESA has *always* been “out of the kitchen” (Hurlbert 2000, 2011a). Fifth, if *Frontiers* really had wanted an article “more grounded in science,” then it shouldn’t have asked for just an 800-word essay.

This was ideology-driven censorship, pure and simple. Illiberality enough to warm the heart of any troglodyte censor in the caverns of a Bush or Obama administration. At one point in our correspondence Editor Silver let slip that her attitude towards my piece may have been colored by the fact that she herself was an immigrant, from England.

Sending all the above information, including my essay and that of Hidingen, to the ESA Governing Board (Mary Power, Allison Power, F. Stuart Chapin, Robert Jackson, William Parton, Laura Hueneke, Margaret Lowman, David Inouye, Debra Peters, Joshua Schimel, Emily Stanley) and the entire 60-member Editorial Board of *Frontiers*, I asked for reconsideration. That request generated a considerable amount of correspondence, I am told, and a few highly regarded editorial board members wrote me personally to offer their support. One said,

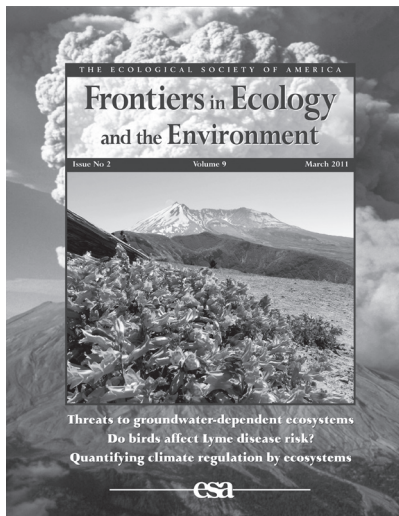
As a member of the *Frontiers* editorial board, I am sorry to hear that this issue was not resolved more equitably...I thought your manuscript was consistent with what any reasonable person would have expected you to write based on your prior publications and web site content. And if the content of your manuscript was not what she desired, I do not understand how it could have gone so far in the review process before being rejected. I actually would have liked to see a healthy discussion about immigration and population growth. Seems like no one wants to talk about population regulation anymore — and I can’t see any solution to our environmental, social, and economic problems that won’t involve a serious reduction in the human population.

A senior ecologist and editorial board member from outside the U.S. chimed in:

[A]ll three pieces on the illegal immigration barricade/control should be published. Increasingly, I'm coming to the view that ecology and politics are inextricably joined, much as economics and politics are. However, if ecologists as objective scientists remain aloof from or isolated from the turmoil of politics then ecologically damaging decisions will continue to be made. The model that ecological knowledge can become incorporated into policy by ecologists producing objective refereed papers and reports or by sitting on expert committees, hasn't worked very well at all. I don't know how this problem can be solved as ecologists are not seen as an essential component molding society's progress in the same way that engineers and economists are. Perhaps, it's because we are not seen as sympathetic or even instrumental to ongoing development.

Another ESA leader not on the editorial board later got wind of the dispute and wrote,

I was sitting on a panel last summer and like a fly on the wall overheard incidental fear and loathing re the population and environment articles in *Frontiers*, but did not know much of the substance or how it all came out. Now I have read the original articles and all of the letters. Let me just say that ESA has a certain, shall we say, sensibility, about population ...



Given that emails can show up in strange (or not so strange venues). I will say no more.

When leading scientists with impeccable credentials know that even they risk speaking out against cant

and censorship you know the scientific community is in trouble.

On August 11, 2009, ESA Executive Director Katherine McCarter informed me that the ESA Governing Board at its annual meeting discussed the matter and concurred with the rejection of my essay by the *Frontiers* editorial board. The official minutes of that meeting (Inouye 2009) give a highly sanitized version of the dispute, repeating the claim that my essay was “too politically oriented” for *Frontiers* — a journal which, of course, is chock full of politics.

So my essay (Hurlbert 2011b) as initially approved by *Frontiers* editors is published as a companion to the present article in this issue. So is an excellent piece by Kolankiewicz (2011) on the same hypocrisy of those environmentalists who claim to be concerned about the impacts of border fences but not the coming doubling of the U.S. population via mass immigration. I had recommended to *Frontiers* Editor Silver that they publish Kolankiewicz's essay, but it also was apparently too disturbingly factual for them.

Frustrating search for the safe opinion

In August 2009 as these events were transpiring, I was corresponding with noted population and natural resources expert Fred Meyerson about them. As I noted in one message,

So far I know of no one in ESA willing to address the immigration-population-environment issue in relation to the U.S. I can get more support on that issue from any local elementary school or Republican ladies garden club than I can from my myopic fellow scientists.

Meyerson replied,

Yes, for some reason, most ecologists are even more scared of discussing this (ultimately ecological) set of issues than politicians are. If we were discussing the population growth and migration of any other species, no one would shy away from it.

Shortly thereafter, *Frontiers* editors invited Meyerson to submit a guest editorial on population and biodiversity for their December 2009 issue. He gave them an excellent one but one focused only on the global problems being produced by global overpopulation (Meyerson 2009), with, naturally, nary a mention of immigration and border fences.

When I later congratulated him on it, I asked, “Did *Frontiers* suggest you stay away from the border and

immigration issues?” He declined to answer.

The editorial prompted four excellent letters, including one by Pimentel (2010) that focused on the “invasive plant, animal, and microbe species [that] ... collectively are second only to humans as causes of extinction of native species in the U.S.” He concluded,

With a human population consuming half the resources per capita that it does today, it has been estimated that the land, water, and solar-energy resources could support a sustainable U.S. population of only about 200 million. One major question is how do we begin to reduce U.S. population numbers to such a sustainable level? Meyerson (2009) aptly noted that “Population policy is virtually absent from the agenda of the 2009 [Copenhagen] climate conference”.... But who are we Americans to complain? Aside from the unimplemented reports of a few commissions, a U.S. population policy has long remained completely absent from the agenda of our own government.

In his response to the four letters, Meyerson’s (2010) closing thought was,

All the respondents point out that the personal and political sensitivity of population issues leads to their omission from climate negotiations and ecological research discussions. Yet we live on a planet where species go extinct and people starve as a result of the growing imbalance between human population and natural resources.... The responsible path for an ecologist is to take an active role in the process, instead of just being a passive observer.

Unfortunately, many of my fellow ecologists will continue to wantonly interpret that exhortation to an “active role” to mean they should merely continue “actively” seeking grants and contracts to study their favorite organisms and phenomena. Perhaps Meyerson’s and Pimentel’s remarks were too cryptic, too nuanced. Perhaps if they had not been, they would not have been accepted by *Frontiers*....

Frontiers gives misinformation a free pass

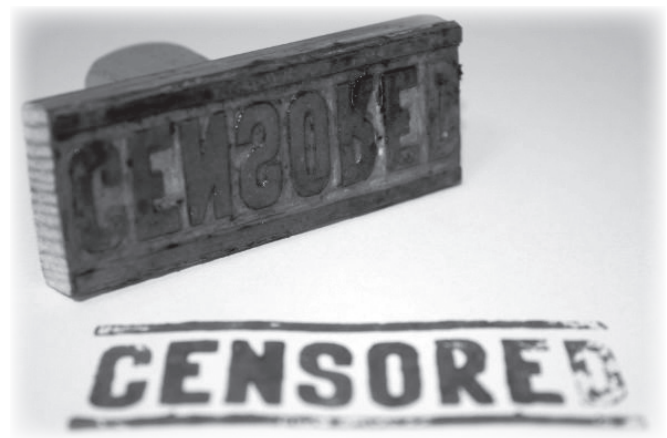
When the two of us who had prepared essays were informed on July 23, 2009 that Editor Silver, “members of the Editorial Board and other advisors” refused to publish the essays, we were also informed that Hiding-er’s (2009) introductory piece would be published. (Inouye

(2009) indicates that “15 members of her editorial board and the journal’s Science and Policy Advisor [gave]... overwhelming support” to Silver’s original decision.)

Silver wrote:

The Board members did feel that Lori’s piece was a good, balanced introduction to the topic and have encouraged me to publish it as a Write Back letter.... This will allow readers, including Guy and Stuart if you so wish, to respond. However, these responses will need to be about the ecological effects of the fence, rather than the social or political issues.

We were being warned, should we choose to write letters in response to Hiding-er (2009), that we, unlike Hiding-er, would only be allowed to comment on “effects of the fence.” Our original charge had been much broader, to assess effects of “increased attempts to control immigration from Mexico.” Under the spell of fulminating political correctness, what excruciating, embarrassing knots editors can tie themselves in!



The entire ESA Governing Board also saw Hiding-er’s essay and unanimously approved Editor Silver’s decision to publish it, even though that essay had never gone through a formal review process. It did provide a good introduction to the literature on environmental damage in the vicinity of the U.S.-Mexico border. But it was rank with misinformation in its off-the-cuff statements on immigration itself.

On its publication, I submitted and *Frontiers* published an analysis (Hurlbert 2010) of three seriously misleading statements in Hiding-er (2009). Two other authors submitted a letter refuting Hiding-er’s claim that population growth of “cities in the desert Southwest ... [is] mostly due to immigration from other areas of the U.S.” Their letter was rejected on a weak pretext by Editor Silver. It is published in this issue with some additional commentary (Martin and Schneider 2011).

Conclusion

Extreme ideological bias against open, factual discussion of the impacts of immigration on the environments and ecosystems of the U.S., both those near the border and those not, is the cause of all the problems outlined here. A balanced, factually accurate essay on the question posed was bluntly censored. A misleading, factually inaccurate essay was published without review. Scientists were misinformed. The public was deceived.

This was accomplished with the approval of virtually the entire governance structure of the Ecological Society of America. The details of this case have seemed worth documenting because such bias, carelessness, and lack of objectivity on controversial topics pervade the scientific and academic communities more than many members of those communities would like to admit. The public needs to know this, and these elites need to get a grip on themselves. ■

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