Deep Ecology and Our Biological Future

BY FRED ELBEL

As Aldo Leopold wrote in *A Sand County Almanac*, "[T]here are those who can live without wild things, and those who cannot." Foreman writes that "as long as I can recall, I've been one of those cannots. I have no wish to live in a world without wild things."

Foreman is a deep ecologist — one who implicitly understands that we are intrinsically interrelated to all life on the planet. More than a not-in-my-backyard environmentalist or even a concerned conservationist, Foreman understands the fundamental biological principles of carrying capacity and overshoot, which *Man Swarm* addresses.

Man Swarm covers the early history of thinking about man's limits, noting that Greek historian Herodotus wrote 2,500 years ago, "Man stalks across the landscape, and deserts follow in his footsteps."[1] Indeed, even Plato saw the impact of man upon the land. Much later, Abraham Lincoln's ambassador to Italy and Turkey reported similar environmental destruction and scalped landscapes. Even President Nixon acknowledged the challenge of curtailing population growth.

The book explains fundamental ecological concepts, including Net Primary Productivity (NPP)[2] and the fundamental Holdren-Ehrlich anthropocentric environmental equation I = PAT.[3] That is, environmental impact equals population times affluence (consumption), leveraged by technology. The book discusses the observations of Malthus, and Liebig's Law, which says that the resource that will run out the soonest limits carrying capacity. As William Catton succinctly observed, "There are limits. We can overshoot them. This is a basic biological fact."[4]

This bedrock truth escapes many in America who are still living under the outdated frontier paradigm misleading us into believing that there will always be more resources just around the next bend. We have failed to recognize that takeover has given way to drawdown. As Catton points out, we're now relying on phantom carrying capacity — we "mistook the rate of withdrawal of savings deposits for a rise in income."[4]

In other words, we are drawing down resources upon which future generations will have to depend. We are in biological overshoot.

The numbers of our species have an undeniable impact on other living things. Foreman writes, "50,000 years ago, there were more tigers than Homo Sapiens. More gorillas… more blue whales... Today, for every wild tiger on Earth, there are *two million* human beings." The number of humans has tripled since the end of World War II. In the 40 years leading up to 1993, we added more humans than were added in the previous three million years.[5]

Man Swarm and the Killing of Wildlife

By Dave Foreman
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Foreman delineates seven ecological wounds that we are inflicting on our fellow living creatures:

1. Overkill. For the last 40,000 years, since our species spread out of Africa, we have been killing off wildlife, large and small.

2. Scalping and taming wilderness. We have cleared wilderness, drained wetlands, diverted water, mined, and covered the land with sprawling human habitat.

3. Fragmentation of wildlife neighborhoods. Fragmentation of ecosystems restricts movement of species, preventing species radiation and stymieing evolution.

4. Upsetting and weakening ecological and evolutionary processes. Humankind has weakened ecological and evolutionary pro-

Fred Elbel *is an Internet marketing consultant and web designer and is spokesperson and former director of Colorado Alliance for Immigration Reform. www.cairco.org.*

cesses through wildfire, predation, hunting of keystone species, and similar anthropocentric activities.

5. Spread of exotic species and diseases. We have, both wittingly and unwittingly, carried many plants, vertebrates, and invertebrates into new habitats where they have disrupted the balance of native ecosystems.

6. Biocide poisoning of land, air, water, and wildlife. Man has poisoned the earth with heavy metals, toxic wastes, chemicals, and radioactivity.

7. Global "weirding" or climate change and ocean acidification. Since the beginning of the industrial area, our activities have led to an increase of atmospheric greenhouse gases that play hob with our climate and lead to ocean acidification. From 1990 to 2003, per capita CO_2 emissions increased 3.2 percent. Yet during that same timeframe, U.S. emissions increased by an astounding 16.1 percent.[6] Foreman observes that "the growing man swarm of the United States was about five times more to blame for our greater greenhouse pollution than was the rise from each of us."

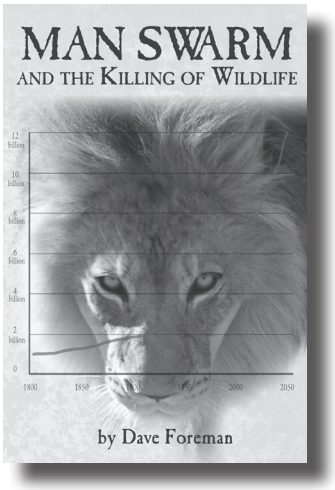
Philosophy Professor George Sessions wrote in 1995, "One's position on the human overpopulation issue serves as a litmus test for the extent of one's ecological understanding and commitment to protecting biodiversity and the integrity of Earth's ecosystems."[7] Professor Eileen Crist writes, "It is critical to focus on what is presently dead certain: that overproduction and overpopulation have been driving the dismantling of complex ecosystems and native life, and leaving in their widening wake constructed environments, simplified ecologies, and lost life forms."[8] Foreman notes Crist has been a lodestar for him on the issue of overpopulation and that *Man Swarm* is the upshot.

Foreman writes, "It's painfully straightforward. There are too many men for Earth to harbor. At nearly seven billion, we have overshot Earth's carrying capacity." The Earth has suffered five great extinctions, and we are undergoing the sixth. This time it is different — our great numbers are the cause.

Economist Kenneth Boulding once said, "Only madmen and economists believe in perpetual exponential growth."[9] This must certainly apply to human numbers. Having fewer children is a prerequisite to fostering a sustainable planet. The Chinese somberly acknowledged this reality by confirming that without their one-child rule, China would have had 400 million more people today.

The domestic population-environmental connection was quite clear in 1968 when David Brower, executive director of the Sierra Club, published Paul Ehrlich's book *The Population Bomb*.[10]

It subsequently turned out that in the U.S., immigration, not fertility, was ever more responsible for population growth. Even so, the 1989 Sierra Club population position was crystal clear, stating that "immigration to the U.S. should be no greater than that which will permit achievement of population stabilization in the U.S."[11]



Then in 1996 the Sierra Club unilaterally flipped on immigration, motivated by a conditional $100-million grant from a donor who said, "I did tell Carl Pope in 1994 or 1995 that if they ever came out anti-immigration, they would never get a dollar from me."[12] The rest of the environmental community shortly followed suit, in what Foreman refers to as "the great backtrack."

Foreman reflects, "In my worst nightmares, I never thought we'd come to this sad day when my own gang wimped out on the underlying threat: the unending rampage of topsy-turvy growth." He warns of the "the mostly left-wing gang of the uber-politically correct that calls any conservationist/environmentalist/animal-welfarist/resourcist who worries about immigration part of a 'Green Hate' racist conspiracy." He continues, "Believe me, they'll burn this book and would gladly burn me, too."

Man Swarm directly confronts the hubris of cornucopianism with reference to biologist David Ehrenfeld, who cautions that faith in *humanism* is based on a stack of faulty assumptions:

- All problems are soluble by people.
- Many problems are soluble by technology.
- Those problems that are not soluble by technology, or by technology alone, have solutions in the social world (of politics, economics, etc.).

• When the chips are down, we will apply ourselves and work together for a solution before it is too late.

• Some resources are infinite; all finite or limited resources have substitutes.

• Human civilization will survive.[13]

Garrett Hardin challenged in 1972, "[H]ow do we get the general body politic to accept the truth?"[14] One might ask, how do we get the general public to accept it?

The book notes that with effort we can bring our per person ecological footprint down, but not enough for *generous sustainability*, meaning "(1) creating societies that leave sufficient natural resources for human generations to live good lives; and (2) sharing the landscape generously with nonhuman beings."[15] Foreman concludes, "It follows, then, that we have no choice but to freeze how many we are and to begin to become fewer."

Dave Foreman is a man with impeccable environmental credentials. He has been a leading environmentalist for 40 years and is the author of a number of environmental books. He has been involved with numerous environmental organizations, and co-founded American Rivers, Earth First!, *Wild Earth Journal*, The Wildlands Project, New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, and the Rewilding Institute.

One might have high expectations of a book from such an accomplished environmentalist and the book *Man Swarm* indeed lives up to the expectation. It is comprehensive, informative, and quite readable. It should be high on the reading list for those who are concerned about our integral relationship to the web of life on Planet Earth. ■

Endnotes

1. Quoted in H.C. Darby, "The Clearing of the Woodland in Europe, in William L. Thomas Jr., ed., *Man's Role in Changing the Face of the Earth* (University of Chicago Press, 1956), 185.

2. Stuart L. Pimm, *The World According to Pimm: A Scientist Audits the Earth* (McGraw-Hill, NY, 2001), 10,23,105.

3. John P. Holdren and Paul R. Ehrlich, "Impact of Population Growth," *Science*, Vol. 171 (1974), 1212-17.

4. William R. Catton, Jr., *Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change* (University of Illinois Press, Urbana, 2982), 126. In Foreman's opinion, this is the best book on overpopulation.

5. Warren M. Hern, "Has the Human Species Become a Cancer on the Planet? A Theoretical View of Population Growth as a Sign of Pathology," *Current World Leaders: Biography & News/Speeches & Reports Issue*, Vol. 36, No. 6, December 1993.

6. Philip Cafaro and Winthrop Staples III, "The Environmental Argument for Reducing Immigration into the United States," *Center for Immigration Studies*, June, 2009, 5.

7. George Sessions, "Political Correctness, Ecological Realities and the Future of the Ecology Movement," *The Trumpeter*, Fall 1995, 191.

8. Eileen Crist, "Limits-to-Growth and the Biodiversity Crisis," *Wild Earth*, Spring, 2003, 63.

9. Garrett Hardin, *Living Within Limits: Ecology, Economics, and Population Taboos* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1993), 44-45.

10. Paul R. Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (Ballantine Books/Sierra Club, new York, 1968), introduction, 34.

11. Sierra Club Population Report, Spring, 1989.

12. Kenneth Weiss, *Los Angeles Times*, October 27, 2004, referenced at http://www.SUSPS.org.
(The author of this book review was a leader in SUSPS during the turmoil).

13. David Ehrenfeld, *The Arrogance of Humanism* (Oxford University Press, New York, 1981), 16-17.

14. Garrett Hardin, "We Live on a Spaceship." *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, XXIII (1972), 23-25, reprinted in Roderick Frazier Nash, ed., *American Environmentalism: Readings in Conservation History*, Third Edition (McGraw-Hill, New York, 2990), 238.

15. Cafaro and Staples, "Environmental Argument," 7.