Malthus Marginalized

The massive movement to marginalize the man's message

by Albert A. Bartlett

Two hundred years ago Thomas Robert Malthus was instrumental in introducing the world to a revolutionary new concept: the quantitative analysis of population problems which focused mainly on the different arithmetics of the growth of populations and of food supplies. Malthus showed that the use of numbers and simple analysis could yield an improved understanding of contemporary and future population problems, and that steady growth of populations would produce great and grave problems. Two hundred years of debate over the ideas of Malthus have left the debaters divided into two camps: the **believers** who accept the idea that it is appropriate to use the quantitative analysis to gain an improved understanding of the growth of populations and of food supplies, and the **critics** who don't. Let's look at the **critics.** Here's a graphic representation:

I — Believers
II — Critics
  a) Non-believers
  b) Diverters
    1) other causes
    2) sustainers
    3) them — not us

The **critics** of the quantitative Malthusian approach can be divided into two groups: the **non-believers** and the **diverters.** The **non-believers** assert that the quantitative analysis is wrong — the **diverters** seek to divert people's attention away from quantitative analysis and focus attention elsewhere.

The **diverters,** in turn, can be divided into three groups: those who would direct attention to **other causes,** to **sustainability,** and to **them: not us.**

Albert A. Bartlett, Ph.D., *is Professor of Physics at the University of Colorado. Comments by e-mail can be addressed to him: barleta@stripe.colorado.edu.*

The Critics of Malthus

The world today faces enormous problems which the **believers** hold to be caused largely by population growth.

The **non-believers** say that the world population is much larger today than Malthus could ever have imagined, and thus far starvation seems not to have been a major limiting factor in stopping the growth of world population. Hence, they assert, the Malthusian message of quantitative analysis is wrong. From this they sometimes extrapolate to say that the human population can go on growing forever (Simon 1995).

It is easy to suspect that some of the **non-believers** are innumerate. ("Innumeracy" is the mathematical equivalent of illiteracy.)

The **diverters** do everything they can to divert attention away from the quantitative Malthusian message about population growth, asserting that the numbers are not the important aspect of the problem.

The Diverters

The **diverters** are divided into three groups:

The **other causes** group would have people believe that the problems of population growth are best addressed not by looking at the numbers, but by focusing our attention on other things.

The **sustainers** try to convince people that we need not worry about population because "sustainable development" will solve the problems.

The **them: not us** group seeks to divert attention away from the population problem in the United States and focus people's attention on the growth of populations elsewhere.

In total, the works of the several groups of

critics constitute a massive effort to marginalize the modern Malthusian message.

The Techniques of Marginalization

The techniques of marginalization reflect the views of the different groups of **critics**.

NON-BELIEVERS: In dealing with the size of populations, the **non-believers** vigorously and authoritatively deny that quantitative analysis is important, that numbers mean anything, or that steady growth will produce intractable problems. This belief is supported by the observation that the world population in 1998 is much greater than Malthus would have anticipated, and the population growth continues. Many of the **non-believers** are not scientists. They assert that science and technology have made this growth possible and that science and technology can make possible all things that we wish to have in the future. In this regard the **non-believers** seem to put their faith in Walt Disney's First Law: wishing will make it so.

The **non-believers** marginalize Malthus by asserting that his predictions, and hence his methods, have been proven wrong.

DIVERTERS: The **diverters** use one or more of the following three ways to divert attention away from the message of the quantitative analysis.

(1) Other Causes: This group seeks to divert attention away from quantitative analysis and to focus it on any of a host of other relevant things such as the machinations of the multi-national corporations, excessive personal consumption of resources, large numbers of teen-age pregnancies, or on the failures of the systems of distribution, equity, justice, education for women, etc. The other causes people are often genuine humanitarians who are greatly to be admired because of their real records of achievement in their efforts to solve problems in these other fields. The other causes people commonly claim that the problems are not simple ones that can be simply solved by the Malthusian method of quantitative understanding. The other causes people may invoke complexity to give the impression that they, and not ordinary people, have the complex expertise is needed to understand and solve the problems. This serves to divert attention away from the fundamental Malthusian message of numbers and arithmetic, and leads the other causes people to advocate that priority attention should be given to these other causes rather than to the numbers *per se*.

SUSTAINERS: The **sustainers** introduce the optimistic terms "sustainability" and "sustainable development." The use of these terms gives the untutored listener the comforting impression that the **sustainer** understands the problems and knows their solutions. In order to achieve the desired diversion, the works of the **sustainers** follow two paths:

First, the **sustainers** must be authoritative and simultaneously they must be vague and contradictory in the use of terms. Above all, the **sustainer** should avoid giving the term "sustainability" a meaningful definition that would cause ordinary people or political leaders any discomfort in their daily lives.

Second, the **sustainers** gain credibility by advocating good programs (reducing resource use, etc.) that are potentially environmentally beneficial, but which divert attention away from the fundamental Malthusian problem of population growth. Unfortunately, the resources that the **sustainers** save are not preserved for the use of future generations, but rather are used to support the current growth of the population. Thus, the net result of many of the actions of the **sustainers** is to accommodate, encourage, and thus to increase population growth.

THE "THEM—NOT US" GROUP: Some **diverters** in the U.S. assert that the population problem is a problem of "those people," meaning people in under-developed nations. By making this assertion, they divert attention away from the severe problems of population growth in the U.S.

When "those people" in the under-developed nations see that they are the target of the **them—not us** folks, they often respond that the problems are not the numbers but rather the excessive consumption in the developed nations. (**other causes**)

Fundamentals

The term "sustainable" has to mean "for a very long time."

The arithmetic shows that steady growth (a fixed percent per year), which Malthus used in his analysis of populations, results in enormous numbers in modest periods of time (Bartlett 1978).

These two facts lead to the first two Laws of Sustainability (Bartlett 1994):

First Law: Population growth and/or growth in the rates of consumption of resources cannot be sustained.

Second Law: The larger the population of a society and/or the larger its rates of consumption of resources, the more difficult it will be to transform the society to a condition of sustainability.

These facts also support the observation that the term “sustainable growth” is an oxymoron.

The balance of this paper will give examples of the several types of marginalization of the modern Malthusian message.

Non-Believers

There is an abundant literature dealing with the **non-believers**. Some **non-believers** assert that the predictions of Malthus have not come to pass, that the world population in 1998 is much larger than Malthus could have ever imagined, therefore the world population can continue to grow essentially forever. This is an example of the “flying leap syndrome” in which a person leaps from the top of a very high building. The free-fall is exhilarating. After each of the first few seconds of free-fall, the person concludes that all is well, and soon reaches the (logical?) conclusion that things will be alright forever. The end comes when the person strikes the ground. The ground was a boundary condition, a limit that the person had ignored at great expense (Bartlett 1980).

The **non-believers** seem unaware of, or ignore, the fact that human activities have already caused great change in the global environment. Many fail to observe that the scale and scope of human activities have, for the first time, grown to rival the natural processes that built the biosphere and that maintain it as a place where life can flourish (May 1993).

Many facts testify to this statement. It is estimated that somewhere between 20 and 40 percent of the earth's primary productivity — from plant photosynthesis on land and in the sea — is now appropriated for human use.

On the national scene, there are prominent presidential-type people who are **non-believers** and who assert that there is no population problem.

When Jack Kemp, who was then the U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, was informed of a report from the United Nations that told of resource problems that would arise because of increasing populations, it was reported that he said, "Nonsense, people are not a drain on the resources of the planet" (Kemp 1992).

Another presidential aspirant, Malcolm Forbes, Jr., editor of *Forbes Magazine,* had a similar response to the reports of global problems that result from overpopulation in both the developed and underdeveloped parts of the world. In an editorial he responded, "It's all nonsense" (Forbes 1992).

These two expressions are consistent with a prominent Ponzi-type slogan that is often heard in U.S. presidential politics: “We can grow our way out of the problems.”

In his article, “The Population Explosion is Over,” Ben Wattenberg finds support for his thesis in the fact that fertility rates are declining in parts of the world (Wattenberg 1997). Most of the countries of Europe are (1997) at zero population growth or even negative population growth, and fertility rates in parts of Asia have declined dramatically. Rather than rejoicing over the clear evidence of this movement in the direction of sustainability, Wattenberg sounds the alarm over the “birth dearth” as though this fertility decline requires some immediate reversal.

The late Professor Julian Simon of the University of Maryland has advocated continued population growth long into the future. In the newsletter of a major think tank in Washington, D.C., Simon wrote:

> *We have in our hands now — actually in our libraries — the technology to feed, clothe, and supply energy to an ever-growing population for the next 7 billion years… Even if no new knowledge were ever gained … we would be able to go on increasing our population forever* (Simon 1995).

In response to Simon, it has been noted that a spherical earth is finite, but a flat earth can be infinite in depth and lateral extent. So if Simon is correct, we must be living on a flat earth (Bartlett 1996).

When evaluating the works of people with impressive academic credentials, it is important to remember another fundamental law: for every Ph.D. there is an equal and opposite Ph.D.

Sustainers: The Brundtland Report

A great increase of awareness of the problems

of global poverty and population problems came with the publication of the report of the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Develop-ment, the Brundtland Report, which is available in bookstores under the title *Our Common Future* (Brundtland 1987).

In graphic and heart-wrenching detail, the Report places before the reader the enormous problems and suffering that are being experienced with growing intensity every day throughout the underdeveloped world. In the foreword, before there was any definition of the term "sustainable," there was the ringing call:

> *What is needed now is a new era of economic growth — growth that is forceful and at the same time socially and environmentally sustainable* (p.xii).

"…in order to be accepted the discussion had to be optimistic, even though the facts point to pessimism."

These two concepts of "growth" and "sustain-ability" are clearly in conflict with one another, yet here we see the call for both. The use of the word "forceful" would seem to imply "rapid," but if this is the intended meaning, it would just heighten the conflict. No hint is given as to the definitions of the terms, “socially sustainable” and “environmentally sustainable.”

A few pages later in the Report we read:

> *Thus sustainable development can only be pursued if population size and growth are in harmony with the changing productive potential of the ecosystem* (p. 9).

“Population size and growth” are vaguely identified here as possible problem areas, but we don’t know what the Commission means by the phrase "in harmony with…"

By page 11 the Commission acknowledges that population growth is a serious problem, but then:

> *The issue is not just numbers of people, but how those numbers relate to available resources. Urgent steps are needed to limit extreme rates of population growth* [emphasis added].

The suggestion that "the issue is not just numbers of people" is characteristic of **non-believers**. Neither "limit" nor "extreme" are defined, and so the sentence gives the impression that most population growth is acceptable and that only the undefined "extreme rates of population growth" need to be dealt with by some undefined process of limiting.

By now one can see how the **sustainers** and **non-believers** confidently make assertions that are both vague and ambiguous.

As the authors of the Report searched for solutions, they called for large efforts to support "sustainable development." The Report’s definition of "sustainable development" has been widely used by others. It appears in the first sentence of Chapter 2, (p. 43):

> *Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.*

This definition gives no hint regarding the courses of action that could be followed by individuals or by governments to allow people to meet the needs of the present, but which would not limit the ability of generations, throughout the distant future, to meet their own needs. It is obvious that non-renewable resources (such as fossil fuels) that are consumed now will not be available for consumption by future generations. Anyone advocating develop-ment has to know that if development is to be sustainable, it must call for major reductions in the rates of consumption of fossil fuels so that future generations may have access to these wonderful sources of energy. This uncomfortable fact is rarely acknowledged.

The discussion of "sustainability" in the Brundtland Commission Report is both optimistic and vague (*see addendum*). The Commission probably felt that, in order to be accepted, the discussion had to be optimistic even though the facts point to pessimism. So it was necessary to be vague and contradictory in order not to appear to be

pessimistic. Vagueness is the key to the arguments of the **sustainers**.

Sustainers: The Agenda 21 Report

Ambiguity about the meaning of "sustainability" was advanced in a more recent report that came out of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, which was:

> *...the largest gathering of world leaders in history [and which] endorsed the principle of sustainable development*. (Committee for a National Institute for the Environment 1993)

The published version of the report carries the impressive title, *Agenda 21, The Earth Summit Strategy to Save Our Planet.* (Sitarz 1993) The text discusses the relation between population growth and the health of the planet:

> *The spiraling growth of world population fuels the growth of global production and consumption. Rapidly increasing demands for natural resources, employment, education and social services make any attempts to protect natural resources and improve living standards very difficult. There is an immediate need to develop strategies aimed at controlling world population growth* (p. 44).

The first sentence is quite reasonable, but in the third sentence, what is meant by "controlling?" "Controlling world population growth" could mean, "hold the annual population growth rate at its 1993 value of approximately 1.6 % per year," which no numerate person would suggest. Why does the Report use the phrase "controlling world population growth" when one suspects that the Report's authors know full well that the critical challenge is to "stop world population growth?" Having thus made a politically correct statement of the problem, the Report then lists the things that need to be done. Here we would expect that the authors would concentrate on the hard realities. Instead, it is all ambiguity. Perhaps their strongest recommendation is:

> *The results of all research into the impact of population growth on the Earth must be disseminated as widely as possible. Public awareness of this issue must be increased through distribution of population-related information in the media* (p.45).

How are we going to increase public awareness of the problem of "the impact of population growth on the Earth" if the crucial report that gives guidelines for the future won't talk frankly and honestly about the problem? How are we going to educate the public about the problem of population growth if we fail to set forth clearly the known concrete details of "the impact of population growth on the Earth?"

"[Population growth] is the engine that drives everything."
— Robert May

Then, under the Report's next heading, "National Population Policies," we read that:

> *The long term consequences of human population growth must be fully grasped by all nations. They must rapidly formulate and implement appropriate programs to cope with the inevitable increase in population numbers* (p.45).

The first sentence suggests that the writers of the Report are **believers**, because they indicate a recognition of the fact that there are serious "long term consequences of human population growth." These consequences could have been set forth in simple, concrete, and illuminating detail, and yet the Report remains evasive, vague, and unspecific. The Report could have educated its readers about the "long-term consequences of continued population growth" and then could have identified for the readers the appropriate remedial courses of action which are necessary to achieve zero growth of population as rapidly as possible. But to negate it all, the Report refers to the "inevitable increase in population numbers." Thus the Report seems to say that nothing can be done, which is not far from the position of the **non-believers** who say that nothing needs to be done. This leads to the question, "If nothing can be done, why bother to educate people about the 'long-term consequences of continued population growth'?"

The Report makes many references to

sustainability, yet it artfully dodges the central issues relating to the meaning of "sustainability."

The failure of the Report, and other similar reports, to address the population problem was underscored by Robert May (May 1993). May, who is Royal Society Research Professor at the University of Oxford and Imperial College, London, was reviewing a new book on biological diversity. He observes that the book:

> *…says relatively little about the continuing growth of human populations. But this is the engine that drives everything. Patterns of accelerating resource use, and their variation among regions, are important but secondary: problems of wasteful consumption can be solved if population growth is halted, but such solutions are essentially irrelevant if populations continue to proliferate. Every day the planet sees a net increase (births less deaths) of about one quarter of a million people. Such numbers defy intuitive appreciation. Yet many religious leaders seem to welcome these trends, seemingly motivated by calculations about their market share. And governments, most notably that of the U.S., keep the issue off the international agenda; witness the Earth Summit meeting in Rio de Janeiro. Until this changes, I see little hope.*

"…search in vain through the report for a direct acknowledgment that population growth is the root cause of most of the problems the agency is seeking to address."

Other Causes: The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has done many constructive and beneficial things. The policies, actions, and leadership of the Agency are crucial to any hope for achieving a sustainable society. A recent report (EPA 1993) is both encouraging and distressing. It is encouraging to read of all of the many activities of the Agency which help protect the environment. It is distressing to search in vain through the Report for a direct acknowledgment that population growth is the root cause of most of the problems the Agency is seeking to address. While the Brundtland Report asserts that population growth is not the central problem, the EPA report avoids making even this mild allegation. The EPA report makes only a very few minor references to the environmental problems that arise as a direct consequence of population growth, but in making these references, the Report seeks to divert the reader's attention elsewhere.

For example, the EPA report speaks of an initiative to pursue sustainable development in the Central Valley of California:

> *where many areas are experiencing rapid urban growth and associated environmental problems... A stronger emphasis on sustainable agricultural practices will be a key element in any long-term solutions to problems in the area*.

Why does the Agency divert our attention away from the problem of rapid urban growth and suggest that the long-term solution lies in "A stronger emphasis on sustainable agricultural practices?" There is no way that "A stronger emphasis on sustainable agricultural practices" can stop the "rapid urban growth" that is destroying farmland! To solve the problems, one must stop the "rapid urban growth" which causes the problems. It is pointless to focus on the development of "sustainable agricultural practices" when agriculture will soon be displaced by the "rapid urban growth."

In speaking of the New Jersey Coastal Management Plan for the preservation of an environmentally sensitive tidal wetland, the EPA report says:

> *The project involves balancing the intense development pressures in the area with wetlands, wildlife protection, water quality, air quality, waste management, and other environmental considerations.*

The "intense development pressures" arise from population growth, but the Report diverts our attention away from "development pressures," by suggesting that the problems can be solved by "balancing." The wetlands can't be saved if population growth continues. The wetlands can't be solved by balancing, whatever that is. It needs to be

recognized that "balancing" generally means "yielding to."

In the Pacific Northwest:

> *The EPA... is an active participant in these discussions, which focus on sustaining high quality natural resources and marine ecosystems in the face of rapid population and economic growth in the area*.

Here the Report diverts our attention away from the "rapid population growth" that is destroying the natural resources and marine ecosystems, and it suggests instead that we focus our preservation efforts on the ecosystems and not on the agent that is destroying them. This is like trying to polish and maintain the beautiful woodwork in a home that is being destroyed by fire, or like trying to rearrange the deck chairs on the *Titanic*.

These quotations of minor sections of the EPA report make it clear that the EPA people have an understanding of the origin of environmental problems. This means that the Agency people are **believers**. However, political considerations seem to require that the EPA people divert attention away from the true causes of the problems they are charged with addressing.

More Examples of Marginalization

Here are more examples of major efforts to marginalize the use of numbers in addressing the population problems.

EXAMPLE A (**Diversion**)

For many years the mission statement of a national population organization was:

> *Zero Population Growth, Inc., is a national nonprofit membership organization that works to achieve a sustainable balance of resources and the environment — both in the United States and worldwide* (ZPG 1996a).

In 1996 , without discussion with the membership, this clear and unambiguous mission statement was replaced by the following statement which is vague and internally contradictory:

> *Zero Population Growth, Inc., is a national nonprofit membership organization working to slow population growth and achieve a sustainable balance between the Earth's people and its resources* (ZPG 1996b).

Notice that the new statement contains two curious contradictions:

1.) Zero Population Growth (the organization's name) is quite different from slow population growth (the new stated goal of the organization). This would seem to violate standards of "truth in advertising."

2.) The organization is seeking "slow population growth" and "sustainability." These two goals are completely contradictory. The new statement violates the First Law of Sustainability (Bartlett 1994).

The new statement also suggests a major change in emphasis — the new statement does not contain the earlier reference to the population problem in the United States (**them: not us**)

The diversion of the acknowledged focus away from the population problem of the United States is disturbing, especially when the case can be made that *the world's worst population problem is in the U.S*. (Bartlett 1997). This is all the more curious because much of the good work of ZPG is devoted to reducing population growth rates in the United States.

Even more curious is the fact that the Executive Director (of ZPG):

> *…outlined some of the actions necessary to stabilize U.S. population. He called for doubling expenditures for family planning programs, requiring insurance plans that provide prescription drug coverage to include all contraceptive services* (Audubon 1998).

Two things are apparent:

1.) The things called for by the Executive Director are necessary, but clearly are not sufficient to stabilize U.S. population, because:

2.) Immigration contributes roughly half of the growth of U.S. population, and it has been shown that it is impossible to stabilize U.S. population without having major reductions in the levels of immigration into the U.S. (Bartlett & Lytwak 1995, and many others).

The refusal to include immigration in the discussion of the stabilization of U.S. population represents a major effort to divert attention away from the source of approximately half of the population growth in the U.S.

EXAMPLE B (**Non-belief**)

The Sierra Club has an outstanding record of successes in the endless battle to save the environment, and for years the Club recognized that stopping population growth in the U.S. was essential to saving the environment. Recently the Club's leaders decided that we could have population growth *and* save the environment, saying in particular that the Club would not take a stand on the difficult question of immigration (which is responsible for about half of the population growth in the U.S.) This is a case of innumerate **non-belief**. Some members of the Club (**believers)** have petitioned to have the membership vote, in a 1998 ballot, on the question of going back to the earlier policy of recognizing that we can't save the environment and have continued population growth.

EXAMPLE C (**Diversion**)

The conflict within the Sierra Club led the Club's establishment to put on the 1998 ballot a diversionary alternative to the straightforward question put by petition of members. The alternative statement contains this sentence:

> *The Sierra Club will continue to address the root causes of migration by encouraging sustainablity, economic security, human rights, and environmentally responsible consumption* (FAIR 1997).

In a similar major policy statement, ZPG says:

> *It is ZPG's view that immigration pressures on the U.S. population are best relieved by addressing factors which compel people to leave their homes and families and emigrate to the United States* (ZPG 1998).

The implications of these two statements are high minded and staggering. A major root cause of migration is the global inequality of economic opportunity. These sentences would commit these two organizations to programs of foreign aid and international involvement aimed at leveling the economic opportunity among all of the countries of the world! This would commit the two organiza-tions to the task of raising the level of economic opportunity in the underdeveloped countries and possibly lowering it in the United States until economic opportunity was everywhere the same, so that this root cause of migration had been removed!

Beyond lobbying the Congress for increased family planning assistance in the foreign aid programs of the U.S., these two organizations do not have the resources needed to become involved in any meaningful way in addressing the root causes of international migration. Therefore these two statements are essentially devoid of substantive meaning, and are offered only to divert attention away from the challenging task of addressing the issue of immigration which is responsible for about half of the population growth in the United States.

With the best of intentions, religious groups often justify their opposition to the reduction of immigration into the U.S. by using this same argument (**diversion)**, saying that we should not address immigration but should work instead to remove the root causes of immigration.

"…the challenging task of addressing the issue of immigration which is responsible for about half of the population growth in the United States."

EXAMPLE D (**Diversion**)

The President's Council on Sustainable Development (PCSD) had task forces that worked to develop background information in several areas. The report of the Council's Task Force on Population and Consumption (Task Force 1995) was clear and unambiguous:

> *The Task Force believes that the two most important steps the United States must take toward sustainability are*:
> *1.) to stabilize U.S. population promptly; and*
> *2.) to move toward greater material and energy efficiency in all production and use of goods and services.*

The Council's report (President's Council 1996) was based on its own analyses and on the reports

of its task forces. The Council's report makes almost no editorial statement about the problem of population growth in the U.S. but it does indicate concern about global population growth (them: not us):

> *The United States should have policies and programs that contribute to stabilizing global human population: this objective is critical if we hope to have the resources needed to ensure a high quality of life for future generations.*

Although it probably was not meant this way, this sentence could be interpreted to mean that **they** must stop their population growth so that **we** can continue to have a high quality of life. The Report notes that:

> *What Americans do affects the lives of people in every nation, and changes in their lives eventually affect Americans.*

Then, in its list of "National Goals Toward Sustainable Development," the PCSD places "Move toward stabilization of U.S. population" as the eighth goal out of ten (**diversion**). The most necessary goal for achieving sustainability is diverted from the top priority to a place near the bottom of the list.

The section of the PCSD report, "Designing Sustainable Communities" (pp.92-95) deals with creative ways to accommodate growth (**non-belief**):

> *While some growth is necessary, it is the nature of that growth that makes the difference.*

If it is felt that the U.S. should "Move toward stabilization of U.S. population," why is "some growth necessary?"

It is frightening to realize the reluctance of our national leaders even to acknowledge that population growth in the U.S. is a problem.

EXAMPLE E (**Them: not us**)

A recent report (PAI 1996), "Why Population Matters, 1996" has the appearance of being a comprehensive review of the global population problem. The 55 pages include text, data, and a large number of well-presented graphs, covering facts and figures, economic development, environment, safety and health, as well as general principles and conclusions. The name of the group that prepared the report is Population Action International, which suggests a focus on the international aspects of the problems. This is borne out in the introduction:

> *The purpose here is to state the demographic case... for U.S. assistance to programs that help slow population growth in developing countries.*

Here is what appears to be a comprehensive report on world population problems, that makes little or no effort to present the population problem of the U.S., even though the U.S. is a major part of the international scene. By omission, the Report conveys the impression that there is no population problem in the U.S.

"Growth management is an attractive contemporary term. It is an effort to accommodate, and hence to encourage, more population growth."

In the last section of the Report we read:

> *Slowing world population growth is important for all Americans*.

An even more cogent observation, that is not in the Report, would be:

> *Because of our high per capita consumption of resources, slowing U.S. population growth is important for all the people of the world*.

It is so easy to say that the problem is **them: not us**.

EXAMPLE F) (**Diversion**)

A recent scholarly report with the title "Getting it Right: A Policy Agenda for Local Population Activists" (Jacobsen 1997) opens by identifying population growth as the ultimate problem:

> *Thus it is necessary to aim at containing population growth at the local scale, if we are to create communities that are sustainable*

over the long term.

The Report then seeks to divert attention away from "containing population growth" when it suggests that it is politically unproductive to say that "the root of all our problems is too many people." (**diversion**) The Report seeks to have local activists focus on the important problems (**other causes**) such as teen-age pregnancies, resource consump-tion, etc., and the Report advocates local programs of growth management. Growth management is an attractive contemporary term. It is an effort to accommodate, and hence to encourage, more population growth.

If we are going to "Get it Right," we can't continue to overlook the numbers.

EXAMPLE G (**Diversion**)

Boulder County, Colorado is in a scenic and attractive location. For decades, "civic groups" in the towns and cities of the County have been enormously successful in the promotion of population growth in the County. All sorts of public and private efforts have been made to attract new "clean" industries, laboratories, etc. to come to the County. The result has been totally predictable.

The concentration on recruiting "clean" industries implies that we will keep out the "dirty" industries. We all want the products made by "dirty" industries, but we don't want the "dirty" people who work in those industries. This is economic discrimination. We are emphatic in our assertions that we want all ethnic and economic groups represented in our local population, but to achieve this, we must have in our community all types of "clean" and "dirty" industries. With proud public pronouncements of our high minded ideals, we keep out the "dirty" industries and then wring our hands to lament the lack of ethnic and economic diversity in our community.

The schools in the City and County are crowded, the streets and highways are congested, the air is polluted, and farms are being destroyed by subdivisions at a rapid rate. The houses that are being built on the former farmland are not for ordinary people but rather for people at the middle and high end of the economic scale. Taxes have to rise to pay the costs of the growth, making it difficult for people on fixed incomes to continue to live in Boulder. Home prices and rents rise relentlessly, and consequently homelessness and helplessness seem to have increased.

The high taxes and the high cost of housing fall hardest on low-income people, some of whom are third or fourth generation residents of the County. Yet the City and County are booming and it is claimed that we have a "healthy economy." The success of the promotions, and the resulting deterioration of many aspects of the community have prompted "slow growth" efforts on the part of citizens groups, and these efforts have resulted in conflict and hostility.

An outgrowth of this has been the Boulder County Healthy Communities Initiative, (BCHCI) which has brought together volunteers from all parts of the County who have been trying to deal with the problems caused by population growth.

All of the problems that bring together the good people of the BCHCI are the immediate and predictable consequences of population growth. Yet the programs of the BCHCI are devoted to inspirational speakers (**non-believers**) who admonish the participants to work harder, and to develop better plans to accommodate the growth. Speakers (**sustainers**) often use the word "sustainable" in the meetings, as if, working harder, we could have a sustainable society. A document titled "Principles of Sustainability" was prepared and circulated (Draft Principles 1996).This document has sections that are vague:

> *Fundamentals:*
>
> *1) It Has to Add Up — We recognize that every activity counts in working toward sustainability and all our activities must add up to sustainability.*

It has some sections that are good:

> *4) Materials and Energy — To the maximum extent possible, activities in Boulder County should reduce, reuse, and recycle resources; avoid the production, purchase, and use of toxic materials; use energy as efficiently as possible; seek to use local sources; and contribute to a transition toward a renewable-based economy.*
>
> *11) Cultural and Ethnic Diversity — We should respect and encourage cultural, ethnic, and economic diversity, the social counterpart to biological diversity.*

Some sections are far-sighted:

> *9) Power of Prevention — Boulder County programs should be designed to prevent problems whenever possible, rather than focused on correcting problems after they occur.*

But these "Principles of Sustainability" never deal with the Laws of Sustainability or with the population growth that has caused the problems that the BCHCI is trying to solve. The "Draft Principles of Sustainability" make no mention of the fact that population growth is not sustainable. This document is not really "Principles of Sustainability," but rather it is "Principles That We Would Like to Sustain."

The problems addressed by the **diverters** are important. The education of women, the distribution of resources, economic and political justice and equity are all vitally important. The world is well served by those selfless people who work hard to solve these problems. Yet as we look here in the United States, and around the world, we can see that the sizes of populations are growing, and we can see places where the problems associated with the growth are so overwhelming as to make it practically impossible to find the resources necessary to address the vitally important issues of education of women, distribution of resources, justice, and equity.

EXAMPLE H (**Diversion; other causes**)

In a "Historical Note" appended at the close of an article on population, the "Editor" reported: (Abernethy 1998):

> *Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt, in a May 26, 1997 interview with ABC, explained forthcoming new regulations for national parks. These included requirements for advance reservations, use of public transportation within parks, and all private vehicles to be left in parking lots at entrances. Secretary Babbitt denied that these restrictions resulted from there being too many people using the parks.*

OUR GREATEST NATIONAL NEED

The thing that is most urgently needed is the initiation of a broad national dialog on the problems of the size and growth of U.S. population.

A Response to the Diverters

The arguments of the **diverters** were pointedly rebuffed by the biologist E.O. Wilson who wrote:

> *The raging monster upon the land is population growth. In its presence, sustainability is but a fragile theoretical construct. To say, as many* (**diverters**) *do, that the difficulties of nations are not due to people but to poor ideology or land-use management is sophistic* (Wilson 1995).

BOULDING'S THREE THEOREMS ON POPULATION

In a foreword to a reprinting of the essay of Malthus, the eminent economist Kenneth Boulding addressed the problem forthrightly by offering three theorems (Boulding 1971):

> *First Theorem: The Dismal Theorem*
> *If the only ultimate check on the growth of population is misery, then the population will grow until it is miserable enough to stop its growth.*
>
> *Second Theorem: The Utterly Dismal Theorem*

This theorem states that any technical improvement can only relieve misery for a while, for so long as misery is the only check on population, the [technical] improvement will enable population to grow, and will soon enable more people to live in misery than before. The final result of [technical] improvements, therefore, is to increase the equilibrium population which is to increase the sum total of human misery.

Third Theorem: The Moderately Cheerful Form of the Dismal Theorem

Fortunately it is not too difficult to restate the Dismal Theorem in a moderately cheerful form, which states that if something else, other than misery and starvation, can be found which will keep a prosperous population in check, the population does not have to grow until it is miserable and starves, and it can be stably prosperous.

Boulding continued:

Until we know more, the Cheerful Theorem remains a question mark. Misery we know will do the trick. This is the only sure-fire automatic method of bringing population to an equilibrium. Other things may do it.

Boulding did not try to marginalize the Malthusian message. He addressed the question with candor and courage which seem to be largely lacking from much contemporary discussion of the population-related problems that are overwhelming us.

Why Continue the Growth?

Instead of accepting the assertion of the **non-believers** that growth is both good and inevitable, we should instead focus on the question of *why* should we have more population growth. This is nicely framed in the challenge:

Can you think of any problem,
on any scale,
from microscopic to global,
whose *long-term* solution
is in any *demonstrable* way,
aided, assisted, or advanced,
by having larger populations —
at the local level,
the state level,
the national level,
or globally?

Conclusion

There seems to be a concerted effort, locally, nationally, and globally to marginalize the modern Malthusian message and to talk about sustainability so as not to offend anyone. This marginalization requires that we make no mention of the facts that:

At all levels, sustainability requires the cessation of population growth and of growth in the rate of consumption of resources, and

We have a serious population problem in the United States.

As the issue of sustainability becomes more prominent and critical, major efforts are being made to obfuscate and to draw attention away from the central message that population growth cannot be sustained. It has been thus ever since Malthus published his essays:

> *It is revealing that many literary people in the nineteenth century were also anti-Malthusians — revealing, because it demonstrates how deeply Malthus' message offended humanitarian values. "The voice of objective reason," Keynes said of Malthus' theory, "had been raised against a deep instinct which the evolutionary struggle had been implanting from the commencement of life..." That same voice spoke against the religious command to "increase and multiply;" and, despite Malthus' protestations from 1803 on, his doctrine was also held by socialists and other radical reformers to be an immovable obstacle to any human action for social betterment. It was no wonder, then, that nineteenth-century writers, characteristically thinking of themselves as humanitarians, resisted the Malthusian propositions... "Malthusianism" is still ritualistically denounced* (Appleman 1976).

ADDENDUM

The *Brundtland Report* used vague and contradictory language in its advocacy and explanations of the new concept of sustainable development. In so doing, the *Report* led the way in the marginalization of the Malthusian message. In contrast, more recently, Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Prime Minister of Norway, has spoken strongly about the urgency of dealing with population growth as Malthus did, by looking at the numbers. Speaking at the Rio conference in 1991 she "urged immediate steps to address population growth:"

> Poverty, environment and population size can no longer be dealt with, or even thought of, as separate issues. (M. Holloway, *Scientific American*, September 1992, p.32).

In her commencement address at Harvard in 1992, Brundtland said:

> Technological trends, patterns of production and human consumption — and *pure human numbers* — call for radical changes in order to reconcile human activities with the laws of nature (emphasis added). I have been stunned to see how the Rio conference seems to fail to make workable decisions on how to curb population growth (*Harvard Magazine*, July/August 1992, p.48).

In literature of an international population group, the Norwegian Prime Minister is quoted as saying:

> Rapidly expanding population effectively strangles most efforts to provide adequate education, nutrition, health care, and shelter (March 1998 mailing from Population Communications International, 777 UN Plaza, NYC, 10017-3521).

The Holloway article also quotes Henry Kendall of the Union of Concerned Scientists:

> People who take issue with control of population do not understand that if it is not done in a graceful way, nature will do it in a brutal fashion.

TSC

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