

Flirting with Cataclysm, Disease, and Famine

The potent three antidotes for excess fecundity

Book Review by Craig A. Straub

Lindsey Grant's *Too Many People* is a handbook that provides an introductory synopsis of population growth issues to the undergraduate audience and supports the critical thinker in awakening those numb to the impacts of population growth on the planet. Grant makes a strong case for saving the future by entering into a sustainable relationship with nature, preceded by ending growth and embracing a smaller population.

Evidence for curbing growth is explored in the areas of natural resources, socioeconomics, and energy:

Humans and the Neolithic age have been proficient at disturbing and displacing natural systems, notably through forest destruction, land erosion and species extinction. With the advent of the industrial revolution, we have multiplied our disturbance as we extract minerals from the air and the Earth's crust, invent new chemicals and dump them heedlessly into the biosphere. Now we are on the threshold of adding genetic manipulation – deliberately redesigning animals and plants – that may be as destabilizing as the earlier two revolutions. We are changing the Earth without having demonstrated that we know how to manage it.
(p. 2)

Grant inadvertently skims the edges of plant warfare, the combat of non-native plant species. Native

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plants contribute to the health of an ecosystem and provide natural sources of food and fiber. The use of herbicides are linked to population growth, neurological deterioration, skin problems, reproductive disorders, and cancer. To support maximum crop yields in an effort to feed a growing world, herbicides are applied to eliminate weedy competition. Herbicides are also applied to eradicate aggressive plant species in an effort to support healthy ecosystems. Introduction of non-native plants into

the U.S. is due to an exploding population, increased international travel, and expanded international trade. Some non-native plant species become aggressive and displace native plants in woodlands, wetlands, prairies, and other natural areas. Non-native plant species reduce local native plant communities, disrupt insect-plant associations for native

seed dispersal, and serve as host reservoirs for plant pathogens. Approximately two hundred native plant species have become extinct since the 1800s and five thousand species in North America are threatened with extinction. About two billion dollars are spent each year to combat non-native aggressive plant species in the U.S.

Synergisms are provided to illustrate the importance of the natural resource base and the implications of human habits:

The loss of forests changes the water cycle. No longer held back by the trees, stream flows become abrupt and erratic. Streams become arroyos, alternating between dry beds and destructive floods. Neither is used for agriculture, and the floods wash out cropland. Production suffers, intensifying the need to carve more land out of the forests, and the loss of trees contributes to global warming, which in turn contributes to intensified storms and

**Too Many
People: The Case
for Reversing
Growth**

by Lindsey Grant

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droughts and crop losses – and the need for still more arable land. (p. 18)

Grant stresses that the most current fundamental issue on Earth is the collision between biology and human growth. In the twentieth Century, the world's population quadrupled from 1.5 to six billion, adding three times as many humans to the earth's surface than in all history. We are losing mammals, birds and fish of endangered status as a result of habitat destruction from human activities. The solution is to restore and reconstruct the ecosystems we have destroyed, creating sanctuaries and protected areas.

...The single best way to protect those species is to scale back our demands on the land and the economic activities that destroy them, and we are unlikely to get very far with such an idea unless we reduce our populations. (p. 62)

The classic example of applying biological principles to human behavior is the Darwinian theory of natural selection, a scientific idea referring to the future. Natural selection is a consequence following the consistent ability of various species to reproduce in a competitive world of limited capacity. All successful species have the ability to bear more young than their environment can support, leading to overpopulation and survival of the fittest. Human population growth was limited by high mortality until medical advances disrupted such a fate. Family planning permits the human species to control growth by regulating fertility, rather than being controlled by the chaotic whims of death, disease, and social disorder.

Family planning is not just something that we are entitled to practice, independently. It is something that the Earth itself badly needs to escape the damage of continued human population growth. It is essential to the preservation of ecological balance in the face of a species grown far too successful. Within our species, it is desperately needed by the poor and fertile of the world so they can escape the evolutionary curse of excess fecundity and so their children will not be trapped in high mortality. (pp. 69-70)

One lesson from history is the Black Death of the fourteenth century where the plague was followed by the Renaissance. The combination of an inefficient feudal system and growing population reduced the population to

paupers. The plague generated an extreme labor shortage, leaving surviving sons with doubled land. The ratio of land to people improved, providing farmers with spare money and enough land to produce enough food for recovering cities. The result was a smaller and richer Europe resulting in the Renaissance.

Grant calls for a new American mind-set to acquire the understanding that growth is no longer a solution to our economic and employment problems. The primary mission of technology should be to mitigate pollution and waste generated by earlier technologies. Growth pollutes and distorts natural systems, and more studies should be conducted to assess the impacts of technology and human activity. The U.S. should lead this effort in the industrial world and assist other countries in developing their own capabilities.

The author also proposes to view immigration from a longer perspective. In the current debate, industry wants more cheap immigrant labor and the idealistic protagonists argue we owe others the chance of our forebears. Opponents point to the cost, social strains, threat of national identity, and impact of wages on natives and immigrants.

The debate usually bypasses the central point. The fundamental issue posed by mass immigration is demographic. It is the impact on our population growth. Two-thirds of this country's anticipated growth in this century will result from migration, and this will have profound effects on our environment and our dream of a sustainable society. Given the magnitudes involved, an effort to mitigate the population growth of the less developed world by absorbing it is to put us in their predicament, without making a significant contribution to alleviating their plight. (p. 90)

As the author indicates, this book is a plea, not a model. This book heightens the necessity and requirement for many sequels of individual models for reversing growth. Every sovereign nation is responsible for living within the limit of its resources and for suffering the consequences of not doing so. The U.S. has a duty to itself and the world to stabilize U.S. population to reduce the burden on global natural resources and to serve as a model for other nations.

Hard cases make good science and ethics. The

allocation of scarce resources is a good example. The wisdom of triage can be fully appreciated only if we recognize the inevitability of competition; and competition between members of the same species is inescapable so long as death is not a sufficiently effective thinning agent, which we prevent it from being with medical advances. Life, cooperation, and compassion are all good things, but we can have too much of any one good thing, considered in isolation and elevated to the status of an absolute good. The central problem, both philosophically and practically, is to find acceptable ways of weighing opposing goods (with due regard for the interests of posterity) so that we and our descendants can lead healthy and balanced lives (Hardin, 1980).

REFERENCE

Hardin, Garrett. *Promethean Ethics: Living with Death, Competition, and Triage*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1980.