

How Did We Get Here?

The environmentalists ignore population growth

Article Review by Barbara McEwan

“The Environmental Movement’s Retreat from
Advocating U.S. Population Stabilization
(1970-1998): A First Draft of History”

by Roy Beck and Leon Kolankiewicz

Journal of Policy History

Vol.12, No.1, 2000, pp. 123-156

The Pennsylvania State University Press

Although I have been a conservation volunteer for 40 years, this well-written article by Beck and Kolankiewicz brought out explanations of why conservation groups have downplayed the population issue I had never thought of. I was aware of the trend but these authors not only noted it but provided the background necessary to understand it.

Between 1970 and 1998 U.S. population had soared by almost 70 million people. Meanwhile, the environmental movement, which formally began in 1970 with Earth Day, seemed to be ignoring population growth as a related problem. Why?

There is a direct correlation between population and the environment. In a high-consumption society such as ours, which also has the technology to make serious inroads into Earth’s resources, the evidence of environmental degradation may be less evident to urbanites — if only because much of it occurs in countries which supply us with their resources. But by 1970 we had plenty of problems of our own. Environmentalists pushed for and got legislation to take care of these problems. Trillions of dollars later, by the 1990s, although some progress had taken place, still there were more endangered species, fewer wetlands, and 40 percent of U.S. surface waters still were not amenable to fishing or swimming, etc.

Beck and Kolankiewicz suggest that there is a list of concepts that can constitute a “first draft” for future

historians to explain what happened.

For one thing, by 1972 the Total Fertility Rate in the U.S. had dropped to 2.1 births per woman, which is considered the replacement-level fertility rate. The post-war concerns that the country was becoming overpopulated began to fade and the majority of Americans — non-Hispanic whites — failed to recognize that the reproductive rate of Blacks and Hispanics did not similarly decline. It was hard for any group to talk about population control without implicating Blacks and Latinos as the source of population growth.

Also, a new element had been introduced into the population debate in 1960 when the Food and Drug Administration approved the sale of oral contraceptives. The action was condemned by the Catholic Church and conservative Protestant pro-life groups, especially when abortion became so closely identified with contraceptives. Anyone in the population movement who worked for population stabilization quickly became labeled anti-Catholic and anti-life and therefore an apologist for abortion. Any group, including environmental groups, which had a significant number of Catholics and conservatives in its ranks, could not afford to antagonize these members so the subject of over-population had to be dropped.

This happened even in such population groups as Zero Population Growth (ZPG) which found more comfort in a new movement drawing public attention — women’s issues. These included family planning, women’s empowerment and reproductive health. While all are important in their own right, they do nothing vis a vis environmental problems and the role overpopulation plays in creating these problems.

Meanwhile a change in U.S. law provided for a dramatic increase in the number of people allowed to enter the country legally. The bulk of these have been Hispanics whose fertility rate has traditionally been high. Immigrants and their offspring from all countries caused the American population to balloon. By the end of the 1990s they were responsible for almost 70 percent of U.S. population growth.

Barbara McEwan is an environmental activist in Forest, Virginia.

This posed a conundrum for non-Hispanic whites who saw their formerly unquestioned dominance throughout the U.S. disappearing before their eyes wherever these immigrants chose to call home north of the border. At the same time, being anti-immigration was seen to be racially insensitive, even though one's country of origin does not dictate race. Added to the subject of "racism" was a new perception of non-Hispanic whites as people being dominated by a bigoted preference for cultural homogeneity extending to a narrow self-seeking nationalism, as one Australian sociologist put it.

Meanwhile a more encompassing trend began to develop. This was driven hard by American business which sought "more growth" as a primary method of making money. Business increasingly reported raw materials from abroad. Then, as various laws kicked in, corporations saw their best interests meant moving production to cheap-labor countries with few environmental restrictions. At the same time Americans, including those in environmental organizations, were confronted by the issues of global warming, biodiversity losses, the decline of the oceans and similar environmental disasters. Their expanded view of the world transformed these blights and U.S. population expansion into global problems needing global solutions.

"No growth," the former mantra of the environmental establishment, was then revised to "smart growth" — an oxymoron. The primary concern became *world* population. From this viewpoint immigrants to the United States were an example of population merely shifting from one country to another, always keeping the world total in mind.

This philosophy fit right into that of human rights organizations. Poor workers had the right to cross national borders to find jobs where they were available. Heretofore loyalty and the economy, laws, culture, and language were centered on communities within sovereign nation-states working toward national solutions of national problems and toward international solutions for international problems. This was abandoned in favor of globalization, the abandonment of national borders. What human rights advocates ignored in their global view was

the "responsibility" end of the equation.

A global view presents an ethical dilemma. Do communities and nations have the right to give priority attention to their own constituents over people outside their boundaries? Can a nation-state make the preservation of its own environment a top priority? What about barring people alive today from migrating to resource-rich countries in order to preserve those nations' environments for future generations? If other countries are still growing, why can't the U.S.?

People commonly migrate to the U.S., not because of personal persecution or starvation but to enjoy greater material success. Unfortunately the more than 4 billion impoverished Third World citizens can never achieve our living standard because the world's resources are limited. Yet the dream of universal wealth continues.

Environmental groups rightly have a concern with immigrant objectives for the latter will vote, thereby influencing and keeping in office politicians who favor immigrant welfare, not environmental causes. California has been particularly affected. Corporations listen because immigrants expand their profits. Many foundations are governed by such mixed interests that they too avoid the issue of reducing immigrant numbers.

Yet the bottom line is this: the environment cannot save itself by itself. When counting populations, most people still do not understand that where you live makes a world of difference in impact on the environment — environmental impact equals population size, times the consumption per person (affluence), times the damage per unit of consumption (available technology). Every additional person adds to the debasement of the American environment to some extent. As it is, Americans have the highest impact on the non-renewable resources of Earth.

Beck and Kolankiewicz have presented historians with a real challenge to explain in greater detail how the American environmental movement did not continue to see clearly why U.S. population growth is the determining factor in saving our habitat as it did in 1970.

•