

Busting Growth

BY FRED ELBEL

“Every day I get up with a civilization to save. I’m crusading to get my town — and the world — into a recovery program from growth addiction...”

—Dave Gardner, *GrowthBusters: hooked on growth*

A film leading with such a statement might induce the viewer to dread a full 90 minutes of pietistic feel-goodism based upon some naive compendium of “10 things you can do to save the planet.” This is decidedly not the case; the movie is a well-done, engaging, and moving documentary.

GrowthBusters: hooked on growth is a tremendously important documentary. It is the story of one man’s crusade against his own city’s growth mandate, and of a civilization which can still achieve the potential of sustainability.

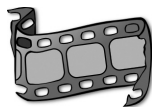
GrowthBusters: hooked on growth

by Dave Gardner

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90 minutes

www.GrowthBusters.org



GrowthBusters presents interviews and perspectives from dozens of experts world-wide and is both visually stimulating and editorially coherent. Frequent changes of perspective — from personal to local to international — seize and maintain the viewer’s attention.

One must marvel at how all of the film’s images and interview segments were integrated into a seamless whole of substantive impact. Full credit must be given to Gardner, who devoted several years of his life to producing the non-profit documentary. Gardner, during his professional 30-year career, directed documentaries

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and related projects for Fortune 500 corporate clients and PBS. He came to realize that endless growth and the consumption-based American Dream were not the legacy he wished to leave for future generations. He ultimately produced the *GrowthBusters* documentary to confront our consumption-based paradigm and to explore complementary value systems which we need to fully embrace in order to become truly sustainable.

The film questions our taboos against discussing our over-consumption and overpopulation and the principles woven into the fabric of our economic system which mandate endless and surely mindless physical growth. It portrays the beast we must fight as “a growth frenzy — a juggernaut of man and machines converting forest, farmland, and prairie into sprawling cities and cold hard cash.”

Growth at any cost

GrowthBusters tells the story of Gardner, a citizen concerned about the growth-at-any-cost mandate of his home town of Colorado Springs. He remarks,

The growth pushers I have a real gripe with are the ones who know that they are manipulating the system — exploiting people, treating us like commodities — and stealing from future generations. So I have to wonder — where is the outrage? We don’t have to buy that propaganda, especially when it’s turning the American Dream into a nightmare... We can’t see it because we’re in the middle of it... We’ve all become slaves to the system we’ve created.

The film follows Gardner as he tries to educate his City Council as to the folly of their perspective. He asks: do they want the Springs to become as large as Denver? Should it then sprawl to the gargantuan size of Los Angeles? What about quality of life consequences to the residents of his hometown nestled against the Colorado Rocky Mountains?

His voice fell on deaf ears and apparently bulging wallets, so he decided to run for City Council in order to

make a difference. He found that no matter how many campaign signs he placed, his opponent was able to dramatically outdo his campaign expenditures. Gardner lost the election, and growth remains a mandate in Colorado Springs.

Eben Fodor, author of *Better, Not Bigger: How To Take Control of Urban Growth and Improve Your Community*, observes in the film that “Most communities have been pursuing pedal to the metal growth, subsidized as much as possible, encouraged as much as possible — making sure every policy they have induced growth as much as possible.”

Michael Swaim, former mayor of Salem, Oregon, remarks pointedly, “It’s almost un-American to talk about stopping growth... It’s legitimate for a community to say, ‘how big do we want to be?’ It is legitimate for a community to say, ‘what is the carrying capacity of our particular place on this globe?’” These are important questions, as ecological carrying capacity is a fundamental issue that can not be circumvented indefinitely.

Our massive numbers

Things are beginning to break down at an accelerating rate. Dick Lamm, former Governor of Colorado, states in the film that “Human kind has itself become a geologic force. It’s changing our climate, it’s heating up our world, it’s making our water tables lower, our fisheries are dying. The very success of the human species is now coming back to haunt us.”

Charting population growth over the course of human history explains why. Modern petroleum-based agriculture and modern medicine have enabled increasingly rapid population growth to 7 billion in 2011 (requiring just 12 years to add the last one billion). While UN demographers project a staggering 10 billion by the end of the century, many question whether those numbers would be even in the remotest sense sustainable.

“We were living as though there are 1.5 Planet Earths,” states Gardner. “We’re doing it by liquidating the planet of some of its resources, just like we were taking some of the principal out of a savings account... We are, in the process, stealing resources from future generations.”

As to why we are blindly pursuing this course, Professor Al Bartlett points out quite simply and succinctly, “The greatest shortcoming of the human race is our inability to understand the exponential function.”

There is no *déjà vu* — we have not been here before. “We are faced with a gigantic challenge that we haven’t been prepared for, either in our genetic evolution or more importantly in our cultural evolution,” observes

Paul Ehrlich. William Rees, population ecologist, coauthor with Mathis Wackernagel of *Our Ecological Footprint: Reducing Human Impact on the Earth*, emphasizes, “We’ve got a situation in which the growth in human technological capacity and human populations and the scale of the economy is completely unprecedented.”

David Paxson, president of World Population Growth, tells us that world population grows at the rate of 9,000 per hour — over 200,000 every day. He asks, “How many of you think that in the last 24 hours, the amount of arable topsoil and land has *increased* to keep pace with 200,000 more people? Or the amount of ocean stocks or the amount of petroleum or the amount of mineral that we depend upon for our high tech society?”



This film is dedicated to Al Bartlett (above), who has devoted his life to informing people about the consequences of exponential growth.

Clearly, our human impact will have to fit within the biosphere if we want to remain here on a permanent basis.

Population pushes consumption

Population growth, consumption, and capitalism are inextricably intertwined. The growth pushes love a growing market and a growing labor pool to keep wages down. Worse yet is the fact that globalization causes us to lose any interest in conserving our natural capital because we no longer see the local consequences of patterns of high consumption. Serious ecological impacts are quite conveniently displaced overseas.

“The whole reason that consumption has become an issue is because there are so many of us,” states Robert

Engelman, President of Worldwatch Institute.

Consumption can not be isolated from overall numbers of people. Bill Ryerson of the Population Institute observes,

Changing the light bulbs, insulating the house — all of those things are good, but reducing family size has a much bigger impact in terms of avoiding carbon dioxide output into the atmosphere now and in future generations.

“We’re all way, way above what the planet can sustain in the long term. If you somehow manage to halve each person’s consumption but yet allow population to keep on doubling, you haven’t gained at all,” explains Stanford biologist Paul Ehrlich, author of *The Population Bomb*.

Robert Engelman continues, stating that “A stable population will develop a stable consumption pattern, whereas a growing population has no particular expectation that it will ever be sustainable. From an environmental perspective, we lose nothing from having a smaller population — it’s a win-win situation.”

Environmentalists and the prickly population issue

The population issue involves a number of touchy political issues such as immigration and abortion and is generally avoided by the well-funded environmental establishment. Robert Engelman points out,

For environmentalists, who face lots of their own controversies just in dealing with the environment and dealing with the argument that the environment is important and that it is threatened, they felt that population was in effect a controversial bridge too far.

Yet population is an issue which *must* be confronted head-on. Veronica Edwards of *Great Old Broads for Wilderness* states,

There are millions of people working worldwide on their own local issues and on global issues, but I think that their efforts will be doomed to failure if we do not address the overriding problem of overpopulation and overuse of resources.

Gardener presses the issue, saying,

It’s a taboo that we have to break down. We need to embolden organizations such as the UN and the Sierra Club to be more honest and frank in their discussing the very fact that the number of the people on the planet

today can not be supported sustainably by the Earth.

The film interviews Lisa Hymas, senior editor of *Grist*, who has decided to remain child-free. She notes that having a child will increase one’s ecological footprint by 570 percent overall because that child will have his or her own children. Indeed, family planning has huge consequences: it is estimated that 50 million pregnancies every year could be avoided if women simply had access to adequate family planning tools.

Australia — Reflecting America

In a sojourn there, the film illustrates that Australia, with its population projected to increase 60 percent over the next four decades, is in the same dire situation as the United States. Australian Dick Smith, author of *Dick Smith’s Population Crisis*, has seen the light, stating that

As a businessman and proud capitalist, to be actually talking about restraining growth is almost blasphemous. We’re so stupid! We haven’t realized that by pushing the GDP up, that quite often the quality of life is going down. We need a new measure — and that’s what we should be thinking about.

Ross Gittins, economics editor, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, explicates how pressure for growth “is coming mainly from the business community. They have very obviously realized that if you can grow the Australian population, they’ve got more people to sell their product to, and the costs involved — they [the business community] won’t particularly be picking up.”

Kelvin Thomson, of the Australian House of Representatives, points out that the consequences of population growth “don’t make for a better standard of living; they make for a reduced one.... What we need to have is a population policy — it’s been sadly lacking, and I think the reason for that is because of the influence of property developers and business who have urged governments and political parties not to have a population policy and to have a default population policy of as rapid a growth as possible.”

It is evident that the courses of both Australia and the United States are being driven by the unrelenting economic demand for unending growth.

Our economic entrapment

GrowthBusters challenges the core concept of our economy — that economic growth is inevitable, and that it is essential for prosperity.

Jerry Mander, author of *Four Arguments for the*

Elimination of Television,” explains how that concept evolved: “The culture essentially transitioned over to being about consumption in the 1950s and ’60s. That was when the need was to show accelerated growth coming out of the period of war and out of the period of depression in order to use up the industrial capacity that the war machine produced. Advertising was the mechanism that made that possible.”

The film highlights the predominant forces that now oppose sustainability:

1) Our economic system is predicated upon growth. In order to service debt, the economy has to keep growing. Chris Martenson explains that “All money is loaned into existence. By its very design, because we have loaned all money into existence, the amount of money in circulation is never as large as the amount of debt in circulation. What it means is this: that perpetual growth is an absolute requirement of our current system.”

2) Our cultural myth equates growth with prosperity. Our entire culture and its media present growth as inherently desirable — a belief that keeps the subsidies and the lax regulation coming. A copious collection of news clips promoting growth are presented in the film to drive home this point.

3) Special interests who profit from growth — the growth pushers — have undue influence. These are the real estate developers, multi-national corporations, investment banks, and the wealthy elite who control them. The growth pushers’ easy, short-term profits depend on our allowing them, encouraging them, and even subsidizing them to plunder our communities and our world. This requires perpetuation of the illusion that eternal growth is both possible and desirable.

“The economy is a subsystem of a larger system — the biosphere... In an empty world, it was a safe bet that growth was making us richer. But we no longer live in an empty world — we live in a full world,” observes Herman Daily, ecological economist.

Brian Czeck, author of *Shoveling Fuel for a Runaway Train*, clarifies that

Once the costs of that growth — things like pollution, overcrowding — and all of the negative aspects of that growth exceed the benefits, then we could refer to that as *un-economic growth*, and something that no longer increases

the welfare, the prosperity of society.

We have embraced an unsustainable future in the name of increasingly faltering economic mandates.

A better future

With our system now on the rocks, it’s the perfect time to try a new model. The film posits that we can indeed raise our standard of living even as GDP declines, asking how do we prudently conserve the resources that we have now so as to build a future that actually is resilient. Perpetuating business as usual is simply untenable.

Dick Lamm concludes,

Humankind needs to be sort of knocked on the head. The good news is that there still is this wonderful life that we can leave our children.

“Do we proactively choose to navigate to a slower speed and work out what a truly sustainable economy would look like?” asks Chris Martenson. The film examines his personal transition to a more sustainable lifestyle centered around a local community that grows much of its own food. He observes, “We are surprised to find that not only is this new life we are leading possible, but it is more enjoyable.”



Growth does not inherently equal prosperity. Gardner remarks,

It is a radical concept to question the pot of gold at the end of the growth rainbow... What we all need to do is to embrace the end of growth, because it’s either that or go down fighting... I want to make it okay to be against growth. Someone has got to hold up a mirror and show us how crazy we are behaving.

It is abundantly clear that with this film, Gardner has accomplished his objective. More than just railing against the status quo, the film concludes with a moving message of hope for a transition to a new beginning.

This is a film well worth watching. It is one of the most important documentaries of the year, if not the century. ■