

Vital Speeches of the Day

REG. U.S. PAT. OFF.

VOL. LXI

JUNE 15, 1995

No. 17

World Population and Your Life

MANAGING THE SPACE WE HAVE

By JEFF DAVIDSON, *Executive Director, Breathing Space Institute*

Delivered to North Carolina Society for Ethical Culture, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, November 13, 1994

SUPPOSE the number of people in your household doubled overnight. Wouldn't that take some accommodating? Imagine that the number in your household tripled in a span of three or four years. You might make an addition or, if you've got a lot of land, you might build another house. What if you had six times the amount of people in your house? You couldn't move. Could you handle it? Probably, but there would be some strains.

The population explosion is a topic that's almost taboo in government and academic circles. It's a topic about which everyone has strong opinions.

In my book *Breathing Space: Living and Working at a Comfortable Pace in a Sped-Up Society*, I have developed what I call the Five Mega-Realities that help explain why our society has sped up. The population explosion is one of these Mega-Realities.

Population and Your Life

World population accounts for many of the problems we face as a species. Look at the news: ethnic conflict, land disputes, tribal warfare — all are problems exacerbated by the population explosion.

You may ask, "Who cares about Burundi or Sri Lanka? Why does it matter to me what happens there?" Sri Lanka, a country the size of West Virginia that is situated near India, has a population of 25 million people and climbing. In a world that is globally linked — connected by telecommunications, environmental concerns, foreign trade etc. — it does matter if Sri Lanka's population increases to 30 million or 35 million. There's not a place on earth where we can hide today — every little island is being taken up. The Lennon Sisters, who appeared on the Lawrence Welk Show, had eleven children in their family. If each family member had eleven children for

eleven generations, they would exceed the current population of the earth — and that's just one family!

It took from the beginning of time until 1850 for the world population to reach one billion — that's a pretty long span. It took only 80 more years for the world population to reach two billion in 1930. It took 30 more years for world population to reach three billion people in 1960. It took 17 more years for world population to reach four billion in 1977. It took only nine years for world population to reach five billion, and by the middle of this decade it will exceed six billion. Population is supposed to level off at 10.5 billion by 2060, but there's no guarantee it will.

Population is progressing at a rate our species has never encountered. Nothing has prepared us for such explosive population growth. Some of the early economists already predicted this would happen, and prophesied that we'd get to the point where population began to outstrip planetary resources. However, nobody wants to deal with the issue.

People often say things such as, "But we have the capacity to feed 10 billion people." If this is true, why aren't we doing it with the number of people we have now?

The *Washington Post* reported in 1994 a breakthrough rice crop that could feed 90 million people a year. Big deal — the population increases by that much every year. The fabulous "breakthrough" will, in reality, only feed the increase in world population. That's not much.

By the time you read this article, the world will have gained 10,000 people. In terms of net gain (live births minus deaths) the world increases by 269,000 a day. That's the population of Washington, D.C., every 13 days, and the present population of the United States every two years and nine months.

More than half of everyone who has ever lived on earth is alive today — the dead are in the minority. Within 25 years, Nigeria, Indonesia, Pakistan and Brazil each will have populations equal to that of the United States.

Although the figures are staggering, you may say to yourself, "No problem, I live in a big city [or the suburbs or the country] and I have plenty of space." However, no matter how well you're able to fend for your family today, somebody down the line will bite the bullet. Somebody will have to pay the price, and your descendants will live in a world where they have a poorer existence as a result of the relentless pace of population growth.

More people and increased international trade equal fewer species. The World Wildlife Federation's endangered species list ranks the tiger as most endangered, then the rhino, next the giant panda, and fourth the Asiatic black bear. Can you imagine a child in the future watching "The Wizard of Oz," hearing "Lions and tigers and bears, oh my," and asking, "Mommy, what's a tiger?"

As many as 100 million people, most of them women, are bought and sold as sexual slaves, primarily in Southeast Asia. There are so many people in this world that often, individual lives become cheaper as more and more people crowd into the same spaces.

Vagabond children in Brazil are shot on the streets of Rio de Janeiro. Many of them run wild in the streets, born to parents who care nothing about them. Merchants in America come out in the streets each morning and keep the sidewalks clear so they will be attractive to potential customers. In Brazil, they may shoot the children who have no place to go and end up living a life on the street. What a world.

There are so many people on earth that we are now clearing land that normally could have remained untouched for countless years. Some diseases have literally risen from swamps in the jungles that have been uncovered. We don't know what else will be uncovered as bulldozers plow through lands that have remained untouched for years.

As a professional speaker, I frequently end up in New York City. I once asked a cab driver, "What can we do about the situation in the world, with 269,000 more people each day?" He told me something I thought was interesting. He said, "Well, let's find another planet where we can live." I thought about it for a minute, and realized it wouldn't matter. In another 50 years we'd end up doing the same thing to wherever we colonized.

You either learn to manage the space that you already have or you lose. One of the reasons why I titled my book *Breathing Space*, instead of something related to time management, is that I found that in the end, we're talking about space management. Space: the only frontier.

U.S. Population

In a wonderful book entitled *Elephants in the Volkswagen*, the author asks why so few people question our overpopulation or if it will stop. The 1960 population of the United States totalled 172 million. Today it has reached 256 million and counting — a 50 percent increase! For every two houses in 1960, we'd need three now.

Half the population resides within a 50-mile drive of the Atlantic or Pacific Ocean. Ninety-seven percent of our population lives on three percent of the landmass. We all tend to live where everyone else does. One major way to attain breathing space in your life is to move out into a less-crowded area.

Seventy-five percent of the U.S. population lives in urban areas, and that percentage is growing. If anything, we are moving closer together. With present fertility rates and net immigration, our population could reach 400 million in the next century. There could be as many as 50 million Californians — and that alone tells us we'd better do something.

More People, More Vehicle Growth

Gridlock is becoming a way of life in metropolitan areas, but even in smaller communities as well. Any community that is a nice haven in which to live eventually becomes discovered, and within a few years so many people have moved there that it's no better than anywhere else.

Automobiles are multiplying twice as fast as people. In the United States today, there are 165 million registered motorists, but 400 million vehicles.

Multiple-car families are the reality of our existence. There are one hundred sixty-five million registered motorists driving 400 million vehicles, in the form of vans, fleets, taxis, buses and trucks. You can see very quickly that it adds up to traffic congestion everywhere. Many U.S. cities today have more cars than parking spaces. The average American drives the equivalent of six times around the earth in his career.

Don't Go West Young Man

Some "experts" tell us that our national population could all fit in Texas. If we perfectly used our resources, they say, and set up an infrastructure, our entire current population could live comfortably there. If that is true, why are we doing so poorly spread out across the nation?

These people who talk about feeding everybody or being able to pack everyone into Texas are dreamers. Their feet aren't planted firmly in reality. Human beings as a species

are rather imperfect, and make lots of mistakes.

There has never been a society in history that had a perfect ecological balance — not even the Native Americans. As anthropologists have discovered, many peoples migrated because they had to. Many times they depleted their forests. People did not understand their relationship to the larger environment.

Sure, we could all fit in Texas ideally. Heck, you also have the potential to live to be 120 — but you probably won't. The ideal possibility is not the reality.

By any standard of sustainability, the U.S. is already overpopulated and mismanaged. By harming the environment, we are depleting our per capita natural resources. Our domestic oil resources at present consumption levels will be gone by 2008.

Dr. Paul Erlich, who wrote *The Population Bomb*, found the following:

—The U.S. population would have to decline from its present level of 256 million down to its 1950 level of 150 million before we would not need imported oil.

—“The enemy to U.S. population control is one-track thinking. The tough question of what is our optimum population continues to be shirked from the highest levels of government down to the lowest.”

One day soon, we won't have any choice but to address this issue. We face the reality of a non-population policy. To understand why, we need to return to the beginning of time.

Four Great Ages of Human Development

Four great ages define human development. The first is the Age of Hunting and Gathering. The second is the Age of Agriculture, the third is the Age of Industry, and the fourth, not completely here yet, is the Age of Information.

In the age of hunting and gathering, people were nomadic. They collected berries, used bows and arrows, and moved from place to place hunting game. They were light, mobile and had small families. Large families were an impediment to moving. Then, a miraculous thing happened, which on the face seemed to be a wonderful development for humankind. In retrospect, however, it has turned out to be the worst development in the planet's history.

People began to discover agriculture; that they could plant seeds and those seeds would grow. Rather than being nomadic and maintaining a small family, they now began to have more babies. It's no coincidence that most of the religious texts say “be fruitful and multiply.” These texts were developed just about the time that people discovered agriculture.

It became beneficial to have a large family — as large as possible. Because the process of childbirth was so risky, and because so many children died, one would have to have six or eight children born in order to get four alive.

We developed the mentality that more children was better — and why not? We had all the resources; there were brooks, streams, rivers, mountains, everything — no problem. Even though we are now entering the information age, this mindset has carried over into the present — especially in third-world agricultural countries.

The War, Famine and Pestilence Factor

Some people think that war, famines and pestilence all reduce population. “Doesn't Nature manage things?” they ask. There is no war, no starvation — even in Somalia or Ethiopia — that can compete with a million new people every four days. Nature does not micromanage our population.

Of course, I'm not arguing to reduce the number of people

already living. I'm concerned about the future generations coming. The key is keeping population at a replacement level (the number of births equals the number of deaths).

People sometimes point to China's attempt at population control, in which the current policy in urban areas allows only one child per family. Even in such a populous nation, that policy doesn't make a dent in the 269,000 more people born each day.

The biggest detriment to population planning is narrow-minded name-calling. Anytime someone comments about the need for population planning, they're labelled with epithets: geneticist, racist, God-player. If we don't plan for population, there will come a time when Nature takes care of things in a coldly efficient way; the population will crash.

We've got to start looking at the problem in new ways, because we have no choice. Years ago a mentor of mine hung a phrase on his office wall. It said,

“Not to decide is to decide. Decision by no policy.”

You need a license in this country to get married, buy a motor scooter, make an addition to your home, open up a beauty salon or vend on the sidewalk. You don't need a license to have children. As a matter of fact, if you were to introduce the concept and go down to city hall, you would get all these labels I've discussed thrown at you.

“What do you mean a license to have children? Isn't it a free and inalienable human right?” It might have been at the beginning of time, and it might have been a hundred years ago, but can we now afford to retain this right?

You've heard the argument: your right to smoke ends where my nose begins. Soon it will be an individual's right to have children against the rights of other individuals — our species has come to that point.

We need to realize that we've got a finite amount of space to manage on the earth. Failure to formulate a population policy doesn't mean we're not already addressing it. As a matter of fact, the United States has many population policies already in place. We get tax deductions for dependents, and systems such as welfare, urban development and day care all tend to influence and increase population.

The Economics of Population

We're at a point in our socio-economic and cultural development in which we must redefine issues and redefine freedom.

An economics professor in the 60s defined economics as the allocation of scarce resources. Until you had scarce resources, you didn't have an economic society.

Only when a society has to manage limited resources is it an economic one. The population explosion has transformed our world into an economic society only in the last 10 or 15 years, and we haven't yet understood true economics — that's part of the problem.

Some people are waiting for technology to save us. We can't wait. We might be able to discover another planet and ship a couple of billion people over there. We might be able to engineer super crops with twice the current yield. Don't hold your breath.

We tend to respond to problems only when they become so bad that we must. That's how we tend to be — we wait until it's so bad that we have only one choice. In this situation, if we wait, we're not going to have any choice at all.

Population and Reality

The growing population means the inevitable loss of individual freedom. In an effort to reduce the smog caused by over-

population, the city of Los Angeles has forced 13 million inhabitants to give up their backyard barbecues. No more having friends over to grill hamburgers and hot dogs — it's all gone! That's a loss of freedom.

Parting Observations

Zero population growth should be our goal, although negative population growth would be even better. I believe the only ethical posture is a policy of "replacement or fewer." If you are part of a two-parent household, you should have two children or fewer — no more. That, to me, seems the most ethical way to control the population explosion.

More than that, we've got to spread the message, and that's a hard thing to do when nobody wants to hear about the truth or be labelled as "evil" for telling it.

John Kenneth Galbraith, a noted economist from Harvard, wrote *The Nature of Mass Poverty*, in which he visited four

continents to determine why some civilizations remain cyclically poor. As hard as it is to live in terrible conditions, how could these peoples stay poor for thousands of years?

He found that poor societies didn't necessarily want to remain that way, but that they accommodated their poverty. As hard as it is to live in poor conditions, people unfortunately find it more difficult to accept the hardship of making a better living. Hence, they accommodate their poverty, and it lingers from year to year, and even century to century.

It seems to me that we are beginning to *accommodate* this "glut of people" — as if it's a foregone conclusion and can't be changed. If we accommodate the glut as destiny, we're in big trouble. This is not necessarily our fate. Our collective vision must be a world in which everyone has breathing space, a world in which we feed our current populations. We need to envision a world in which we manage the space we have.