

IT'S NOT HOW MANY WE ARE, IT'S HOW WE'RE ORGANIZED,

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Thomas Prugh and Erik Assadourian make a strong case for a reduction in the human footprint upon the earth. As they point out, there is much we still do not know about the earth's carrying capacity and breaking points. Our activities are destroying the delicate balance that has made our existence possible.

Ironically, one of the great threats to the earth's ecology is the expansion of material prosperity and increase in human longevity. We have become very good at expanding the quantity of goods produced from what nature has provided. And, we have learned how to keep people alive long after we are able to produce goods or perform services. Prugh and Assadourian highlight the shortsightedness of the methods employed as we exploit the planet's resources, observing: "Bounty is taken for granted, especially by those societies ... in which the hallucination of limitless wealth is sustained by importing carrying capacity from elsewhere." Here in the United States, a pattern of conspicuous consumption overwhelms efforts to move toward sustainability. For example, even as family size falls, the size of newly-constructed homes increases. Developers are building more and more mini-mansions in response to the desires of the affluent. Few of these homeowners give any thought to the aggregate impact their decisions and behavior are having on the future.

There are other unforeseen consequences of how we behave. We are not facing up to one of the most serious societal challenges in history. In much of the world, population growth is coming to a halt (except for immigration, which is increasingly resisted by majority populations). In his 1999 book, "Gray Dawn", Peter Peterson sounded the warning: how will the needs of a huge elderly population be met when fewer and fewer adults will be working, producing goods and services and paying taxes. As we consider the future of the earth, a resurgent birth rate is hardly the solution to the economic and social challenges this demographic shift presents. Yet, that is exactly how some governments are responding - by providing incentives for families to have more children.

In my view, the pressing need to stabilize and reduce human population is not a validation of Malthusian forecasts. The source of our problem is not the size of the human population itself. Rather, the mass the people are prevented from securing a decent human existence by the manner in which human societies are organized. The socio-political arrangements and institutions in every society reward and perpetuate behavior that is counter to our long-term survival as a species. The differences are differences of degree rather than differences of kind. As the philosopher Henry George long (continued on p. 4)

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ago wrote, civilization is a very thin veneer that keeps in check our tendency to exhibit aggressive and violent behavior. That veneer is in much of the world today wafer thin.

An atmosphere of scarcity, whether natural or artificially contrived, tends to reduce our cooperative behavior and exacerbate conflict. Here we are in the twenty-first century, and a considerable part of humanity continues to live subjected to hierarchically-dominated social structures, the origins of which are ancient and the source of the worst sort of indefensible inequities. One need look no farther than Scotland for a system of land monopoly that denies to the majority their basic right of equal access to the earth.

We instinctively react with horror to the devastation caused in the name of ethnic or quasi-religious nationalism. Yet, adherence to doctrines of cultural and moral relativism is widespread. Philosophical thought is buried beneath an endless barrage of fundamentalist doctrine, creating a world so filled with true believers that even Eric Hoffer would find it difficult to fathom. What is needed to counter this destructive condition is a penetrating, consistent and global dialogue to achieve significant understanding and acceptance of first principles. Without consensus, without a deep understanding of what principles ought to form the basis for our socio-political arrangements, the best we can hope for are limited holding actions, equivalent to rising every day to put our fingers in the deteriorating figurative dike.

World Watch is one of the few organizations in a position to spearhead the type of global public dialogue called for. The fundamental question I would pose to initiate such a dialogue is whether "the earth is the birthright of all persons equally." If there is broad acceptance of this perspective as a core principle, THEN we are required to challenge - on principle - assertions of sovereign control made by some over portions of the earth. What, then, does justice require to secure and protect this first principle of a universal system of socio-political arrangements?