



Population and Location Values

Congratulations to *World Watch* on a balanced and thoughtful group of readings [September/October 2008 issue] on the challenges we face associated with our “footprint” on the Earth and its life-support system. If there is any reason for hope, it is the fact that so many thoughtful people are not simply in dialogue but are taking action. That said, we are living in a period of intense uncertainty, made more difficult by the loss of momentum toward shared cultural values and norms. Movement toward just law that embraces and protects human rights has been derailed by deepened claims by groups to exclusive sovereignty over territory. Even the noble principles of the Law of the Sea treaty—recognizing the seas and the resources of the seas and sea beds as a global commons—have been supplanted as nation-states grab portions of the commons for exploitation and profit.

In parts of the world, millions of people are forced by systems of government that favor an elite few to live at the very margin of existence. As we know, this is why much of the tropical rain forest has been cleared by people desperate to find some means of survival. At the same time, millions of acres of fertile land are held idle or set aside to graze cattle or sheep. Monopolization of rural agricultural land is one of the main drivers of people into the cities in search of any kind of work.

The population-related issues are so intertwined with both the high cost and diminishing access to land that we have no hope of solving one without the other. Every society needs to build a fund to provide what the philosopher Mortimer

Adler described as the “goods necessary for a decent human existence.” And every society has the basis for such a fund in the form of land values. As I have written on several occasions in *World Watch*, the public collection of land (or, location) values is essential for an equitable sharing of the commons by all citizens. The private control over any portion of the Earth must be understood to be a privilege, for which society must be fully compensated. Only then, when individuals are no longer able to profit or grow rich by gaining control of the commons (that is, what has been provided freely by nature) will we resume the momentum toward universal values. Only then will our reproductive behavior begin to embrace the full range of considerations so necessary to the long-term survival of our species.

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Correction: In “The Meaning of Columbus Day” (November/December 2008), we misspelled the name of Marshall Eakin, one of the historians cited by author Mac Chapin. We apologize for the error.

TALK TO US!

Please include your home town, country, and phone number (not for publication). Letters may be edited for clarity or brevity. Send them to: tprugh@worldwatch.org

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