

The Fate of America

By Tim Palmer

This Forum examines the current levels of destruction of the American environment by our current population growth, fueled by immigration, which continues to devastate our natural resources. Already ninety-eight percent of old growth forests have been destroyed, and a third of our plants and animals could face extinction. Meanwhile, sprawl consumes three million acres of farmland and green space each year. These ecological losses are increasingly exacerbated by rampant population growth. By 2050, a staggering 404 million Americans will consume what remains of a shrinking natural resource base. America must embrace population reduction by promoting a reduced population, as sixty-three other nations have already done. If we do not act now to reduce population growth, the future consequences on the environment and humanity could prove catastrophic.

America's Changing Landscape

From one shining sea to another, well-known places in the United States are becoming unrecognizable. Hometowns, rural countrysides, mountain retreats, the borders of our national parks, and the sprawling belts around our cities illustrate the rapid-change scenario that leaves old identities in the dust, or more literally, under the asphalt. And beyond that strange twist of cultural and geographic destiny, the land is failing to function, failing to support us. The flood damages grow worse, the hurricane disasters more severe, the water more toxic with pesticide residues, and the soil saturated with chemicals that debilitate it as a source of life. Alarmed at these changes, I set out to write a book about the American landscape at the turn of the twenty-first century. I investigated mountains, forests, grasslands, deserts, rivers, lakes, wetlands, and seashores. I sought to document the changes, to understand the reasons for them, and to learn how people are responding.

Verification of a vast and troubling litany of loss is easily found: up to ninety-eight percent of the old-growth forest has been cut, less than four percent of the tallgrass prairie remains, a third of our waters are unfit for use, a third of our native plant and animal species could face extinction, mountaintop removal decapitates whole topographies in the Appalachians, and sprawl consumes three million acres a year—more than double the rate experienced as recently as the 1980s. Provoked by all of this—necessitated by it and motivated by it—people everywhere are taking new re-

sponsibility for stewardship of their homelands. They're forming land trusts, watershed associations, study groups, educational programs, and political campaigns for future-looking public officials. These people are the heroes and heroines of my book, *The Heart of America*.

Because of their work, the curve of protection activity and effectiveness has gone up dramatically since my youth in the 1950s. But the curve of destruction is still climbing steeper. The reforms that people are striving toward are utterly essential for the health of our land. But no matter what all these people do—even if they are successful with progressive new directions in the difficult arena of land-use planning and sustainability—population growth still renders the finest efforts futile unless our country comes to grip with the fundamental force of population growth now responsible for liquidating so much of the natural wealth of the continent.

Rampant Population Growth

Nearly doubling in the past half-century, the American population has reached 275 million and is increasing by more than two-and-a-half million a year. At the current rate, another 35 million people will be added to the United States by the year 2010—the equivalent of another New Jersey every three years. In January 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau projected that our population would reach 404 million by the year 2050 and 571 million by the end of the twenty-first century. “High estimates” considered possible by the Bureau foresee a population of 553 million by the year 2050 and 1.2 billion by the year 2100.

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With such growth, one might expect that everything man-made has also doubled in the past half-century or so, from houses and cars to garbage, asphalt, and streetlights dimming the stars at night. But while the population has swollen, each person's consumptive capacity has also increased by two times, causing total consumption to boom by 400 percent in only fifty-eight years. Between just 1960 and 1987, the urbanized acreage doubled. And aside from the increase in new dwellings, the size of the average house jumped 25 percent during the 1980s though the size of families did not grow. Each year, highway departments paved 11,200 more miles of road.¹ The number of motor vehicles grew at twice the rate of population growth from 1970 to 1995, and the number of miles driven per vehicle also increased 20 percent. These trends continue. Even if they didn't, a reduction in per capita consumption would only buy time to allow an increasing population to eventually reach the same high levels of impact on the earth.

For most people, population growth is not a distant problem but one that affects them directly, in their own communities, every day. Crime increases with population. Anybody from a small town or rural area will unhesitatingly confirm this fact after visiting a large city, but statistics bear the trend out as well.² Taxes also increase with population. This, too, is obvious to anyone who has paid taxes in a rural community and then moved to an urban or suburban one. In Loudoun County, Virginia, economists found that for every \$1.00 in tax revenues collected, \$1.28 in services were required for residential land uses, while only \$0.11 was required for farmland. And the more a community grows, the more expensive it becomes to maintain basic services. In the early 1990s, roads, water lines, sewers, and parkland needed for each new home in booming Portland, Oregon, cost \$28,500—an expense that had to come from taxes.³ According to author William Ashworth in his book on economics, “The biggest creators of new taxes are not the tax-and-spend welfare Democrats in Congress, but the economic development committees of the Chamber of Commerce.”⁴

Housing costs likewise increase with population growth, as comparison of most small-versus-large communities will show. When Portland grew by 35,000 people per year between 1991 and 1995, housing costs jumped 32 percent. But median income rose only 8 percent; many local families found themselves priced out of the market.

In the face of current population growth, open lands all across America are threatened, and hard-earned environmental gains of the past will be wiped out. For example, through vigorous conservation measures, per capita use of energy barely increased from 1970 to 1990, but total energy use still rose 36 percent, with nine-tenths of the increase from population growth.⁵ This affects mountaintop removal for coal in the Appalachians, gas drilling on the eastern front of the Rockies, hydropower dams on salmon streams of the Northwest, and the threatened status of the last great wilderness on the Arctic Coastal Plain in Alaska. For a time, the perceived quality of life in some communities may go up with more population, but most of our towns, cities, and states passed that point long ago. Now, with a more crowded land, the quality of life goes down, and the liberties we enjoy and cherish as a birthright are eroded by the pressures of scarcity, competition, and the regulation that goes with overcrowding.⁶

After looking at what's happening to the American land, I can see that all the current talk of personal freedom—from libertarians claiming sovereignty in Montana to the Republican Congress voting for deregulation in Washington, D.C.—fails to grapple with the real cause of eroding liberties. The culprit is not a mindless bureaucracy but rather growing numbers of people whose needs and conflicts require that we have fees for building permits, high-rise apartment buildings even for people who don't want to live in them, restricted entry at the most popular national parks, and two-hour tow-away zones designed simply to give someone else a chance to park their car. We didn't have or need these things when our population was small.

Overconsumption of Resources

Studies have shown that in North America, at current rates of consumption, each person requires 12.6 acres of land for support.⁷ A city of 1 million thus requires 12.6 million acres for its support in living space, food processing, commodity production, and waste disposal. And that assumes “productive” land. With these figures in mind, America is not nearly as spacious as it might seem, even beyond the sprawl of the cities.

A phenomenon I call the “delusion of open space” occurs when flying over the United States. I think

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everybody experiences this: I look out the window and see a lot of “empty” land. But when I consider the facts that water must be available for people to live, that those 12.6 productive acres are needed by each person, that substantial acreage in areas such as floodplains must be available for the earth’s built-in maintenance program to function, that habitat must be shared with other forms of life if natural systems are to survive and we’re not to be alone in this world, and that a bottomless deficit is accumulating every day because we consume massive amounts of non-renewable resources just to sustain the population we already have—when I consider all that, I can only conclude that America is full. Indeed, it’s over-full, whether I see “empty” land out the window or not.

Looking at this question in a far more systematic way back in 1972, the Rockefeller Commission concluded that there was no benefit to further population growth in America. In 1980 the Global 2000 Report to President Reagan agreed. But neither study had much affect on national policy.⁸ By the time the 1990s era of rapid economic growth and runaway materialism rolled around, it became more and more evident that we were consuming the resources of the earth and of future generations as if the monetary wealth of today’s people was the only thing that mattered.

Our current population subsists to a large degree on nonrenewable resources, principally fossil fuels, which will someday run out. This exhaustion of our capital extends to prime farmland, soil, forest productivity, ocean fisheries, groundwater, and minerals.⁹ Once these things are gone, how will people live? Renewable resources such as solar power and well-managed forests offer us an answer to this conundrum and a path to the future, but it’s not the path we’re on. Economist Robert Costanza reported that a U.S. population of 85 million could exist on renewable resources at current per capita consumption levels; with half our current rate of consumption, which is how we lived in 1950, renewable resources could support 170 million people – still only 63 percent of our current number.¹⁰ Costanza concluded that a reduced population should be our goal. Otherwise, with unlimited numbers of people vying for limited resources on earth, a drastic lowering of the standard of living emerges as the only future in sight.¹¹ This scenario is graphically seen in the swarming capital city of our next-door neighbor, Mexico, where a quarter of the 16 million residents live in extreme poverty without adequate shelter.¹² Scarcity, inflation, poverty, regulation, fatal levels of pollution, and an erosion of freedom are unavoidable consequences of an ever-increasing population.

A stable population would mean little additional loss of open space from mountains to seashore and all across the landscapes of America. While conventional wisdom holds that we must grow, more and more people now wonder why. The population of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, declined by nearly half since 1950

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and in the process the city was transformed from a deadly exemplar of pollution and urban decay to the “most liveable city in America” with an unemployment rate of only 4.3 percent. Meanwhile, high-growth cities such as Los Angeles and Miami only got worse.

A goal of stabilizing population does not mean we cannot grow. Free of the struggle to simply accommodate more and more people and free of the all-absorbing efforts to cope with the challenges of an ever-larger population—whether this means building a larger church or finding another landfill—people could turn their energies to growth of other kinds: greater meaning in our work, more time for the family, better education, added opportunities to learn and explore, more exercise for recreation and health, a strengthening of friendships, a heightened sense of community, more closeness to each other and to the earth. Every person can add to this wish-list of what could be growing instead of traffic jams, taxes, and the size of prisons.

Even in today’s picture—one that history may regard as a depiction of madness—there could be hope, because, driven by new cultural desires, by education, by economic imperatives, and by safe, reliable, and accepted methods of contraception, the birth rate among established Americans is quite low. The fertility rate in 1990 hovered at about two children per woman—up from 1.8 in 1976, and higher than in Europe, though still at a level that would result in a plateau of population fairly early in the twenty-first century.¹³ But that’s not going to happen.

Immigration: Culprit of Population Growth

The birth rate of established Americans is low, but because of immigration, the national growth rate continues to soar. According to Census data, 62 percent of the increase from now until the year 2050 will come from immigration along with the high birth rates among new immigrants.¹⁴ The National Research Council predicted that two-thirds of the growth to 2050 will result from immigration.¹⁵ Much of this growth owes directly to Congress, which in 1990 increased legal immigration rates by 35 percent, raising it to the highest level in history—an immigration rate exceeding that of any other nation.¹⁶

If immigration continues at a high level, the rapid rate of population growth will not subside. The Census Bureau's medium estimate calls for 404 million people.¹⁷ And that's only until 2050. At that point, much of the United States will look more like the crowded island of Japan than the America we know. Choosing to have virtually no immigration, the Japanese population, in fact, is expected to shrink while ours increases with no bounds.¹⁸

Sixty-two percent of the increase from now until the year 2050 will come from immigration along with the high birth rates among new immigrants.

Of course, almost all Americans today are descended from immigrants. But consider, as well, that most of those people came when there was space and resources for them (native Americans certainly disagree, but still, there was clearly more space for immigrants in the past than there is today). Now the situation has changed. Though space and resources are now scarce, an estimated 1 million legal and illegal immigrants move here each year.¹⁹

It's not fair that my ancestors made it into America unrestricted but that today, people from other countries cannot, but neither was it fair that my parents' generation had to deal with both the Great Depression and World War II. Runaway population growth, quite simply, is the great challenge of our time. And many people are aware of this.

A Roper poll in 1997 found that 54 percent of Americans, including majorities of Latinos, supported a reduction of immigration to 100,000 or fewer people per year—one tenth the 1997 rate. Seventy percent supported a limit of 300,000 or less—a number that could still allow for needs such as unification of nuclear families. In a 1999 poll contracted by Negative Population Growth, Florida voters by a 2:1 margin supported the reduction of immigration levels. And regarding overall population, Americans by a seven-to-one margin thought there were already too many people—a view shared widely across lines of race, income, region, and education.²⁰ This landslide of public opinion should come as no surprise. It's evident in people's choice of living space: we move to the suburbs and spacious neighborhoods for more room. We resettle in less-crowded regions such as the Northwest and Rocky Mountains, we vacation where there's open space, and we try to avoid rush hour. We're dismayed when the Saturday night movie is sold-out, or when we have to wait in line for anything.

While many regard population as an issue that we can do nothing about—beyond the important personal response of having fewer children—that's not true. A single act of legislation could lower the legal immigration rate and set America on the course of population stability. Of all the factors in population growth, legal immigration is the one we should most be able to control. We could address the substantial humanitarian obligations tied up in this issue by helping other countries attain population stability and helping them improve their quality of life. This can be done by educating women, which has dramatic spinoff effects through cultures.²¹ We could work toward reducing the "push" for immigration by supporting family planning worldwide, reducing resource depletion, and encouraging respect for human rights.²² A restricted immigration quota should be coupled with U.S. reforms and aid programs toward these ends with the result of really helping the other countries rather than just providing an escape valve so that Los Angeles becomes like Mexico City, so that Sacramento becomes like Los Angeles, and so that Boise, Idaho becomes like Sacramento.

Some people with humanitarian conscience believe that we cannot solve our own population problem until we solve the population problems of the world. But most countries have eschewed that view and adopted low immigration quotas. More important, considering the magnitude of global population growth, many people believe that worldwide overcrowding cannot be solved in time to preserve anything of much value in America if growth continues as it is. They agree that we must do everything we can to find global solutions. But in the meantime, our first responsibility is not for the islands of Tonga—just one of scores of overcrowded countries whose people want to come to America—but for our own country and for the livability, health, and sustainability of our own communities and our own generations to come. They ask, "Without saving ourselves, how can we save anyone else?"

Many programs worldwide have effectively and voluntarily lowered birth rates; sixty-three nations have adopted some kind of policy to lower fertility (America is not among them).²³ For example, a program in the Philippines encouraging "small, happy families" strives to improve education on the issue. Supporting such programs (which do not include the strong-armed model of China) may be a far better investment than trying to accommodate the virtually unlimited num-

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bers of people who want to emigrate to the United States from overpopulated countries. Recently in New York City, I hailed a taxicab driven by a fine and thoughtful immigrant from Bangladesh. I asked, “Do other people in your country want to come to America?” Without hesitation he responded, “*Everybody* in Bangladesh wants to come to America.” Even if his statement was rhetorical, consider that the population of his country-of-origin is 135 million. Even if we opened the floodgates of immigration to the U.S., we would scarcely put a dent in the demand from regions such as Central America alone.²⁴

In spite of a global situation in which there is little hope of stabilizing population in time to protect America from enormous amounts of immigration and the attendant effects of rapid growth, some environmental groups, such as the Sierra Club and National Audubon Society, have declined to take a position on the issue. “Immigration is an extremely divisive topic,” explained Pat Waak, director of Audubon’s population program. “We prefer to work on creating a broad constituency. Half the pregnancies in the U.S. are unintended, and that alone presents a huge mission.”

The Need for Negative Population Growth

Some people still argue that unlimited population growth will serve us well by offering cheap labor, more consumers, and cultural diversity. But by looking deeply at the land, by striving to understand its workings and meanings, I can draw only one conclusion: the earth is finite, and unlimited numbers of people cannot live on a limited earth.

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Our population doubled in the last fifty-eight years, as it will likely double again in the 21st century, and this process of doubling needs to be understood as the virtual exponential growth that it is. Biologists, who see this kind of thing often in experiments, use this analogy: If duckweed on a pond doubles every week, and only one square foot is now covered on a 100-acre pond, when will the whole pond be covered? It will take only twenty-six weeks. That’s fast. But the real lesson for our society is this: in the twenty-fifth week, the pond will be only half covered. At that point there will appear to be plenty of open water. Yet in fact, the pond will be completely covered only one week later. If America does not already appear to be full, it certainly seems to be half full, which allows us only one more doubling cycle to bring about change and take responsibility for our numbers.

Otherwise, what will happen? According to demographic analyst Lindsey Grant, at recent growth rates it would take only 600 years for the world’s human population to reach the absurdity of one person on each square meter of ice-free land.²⁵ Obviously that won’t happen. A mass die-off from disease, starvation, or warfare over scarce resources will intervene, likely with unparalleled horror in human suffering. So, if adjustments are to be made, why not make them now, before the level of suffering escalates? Why not now, while we still have something of value left in America?



Tim Palmer is the author of twelve books on the American landscape, its rivers, and the environment. This article is adapted from his latest book, The Heart of America: Our Landscape, Our Future, recently published by Island Press.

Notes

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