



## BOOKNOTES

### THE COSTS OF OVERPOPULATION

Leon F. Bouvier & Lindsey Grant

#### How Many Americans?

(San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, August 1994)

To Order: 1-800-935-1056

**W**e at NPG believe our members should know about this book. NPG played no role in its production, but both authors have written articles in the NPG FORUM series. We think it is so important we have ordered copies to distribute to major libraries.

Too much of American population writing is about other countries, particularly those in the third world. This one is about our own country, and the authors state their message at the beginning: "First, the human race is a part of the natural ecosystem of Earth, not a privileged superspecies given the earth as its inheritance. Second, the disturbances caused by human activities have accelerated so dramatically in this half-century, driven by population growth and the technological explosion, that they threaten not only the continuation of a way of life that we have come to take for granted, but perhaps even the continuation of life systems as we understand them. Third, the United States, because of its size and consumption habits, is the most destabilizing unit of the vast ecosystem we call Earth... And fourth, the means for controlling and reversing these terrible forces lie within our hands, if only as a society we can be wise enough to understand and employ them."

The authors point out that the nation grew from 76 million in 1900 to 249 million in 1990, and 43 percent of that growth consisted of post-1900 immigrants and their descendants. Present immi-

gration and fertility patterns would lead to a population of 397 million in 2050 and 492 million in 2100, and 91 percent of that growth would be post-2000 immigrants and their descendants.

In other words, American fertility and particularly American immigration policies place us in a league with the ruinous population growth patterns of India and Bangladesh. Moreover, our growth is far more destructive because of our style of living. Continued high levels of consumption combined with third world-like population growth is a prescription for disaster.

The book catalogues the present problems, and it shows how population increase will make things worse. Urban problems and unemployment, the energy transition away from petroleum, nuclear waste and sewage sludge (most city dwellers will be drinking water from sewage plants). Biodiversity, and the rising resistance of agricultural pests and diseases to pesticides and medicines. Acid rain, climate change, water resource depletion and the poisoning of our supplies, topsoil and agriculture, forests, wetlands and fishery (which is already in a state of collapse.) They don't leave much out.

Nevertheless, their message is not simply one of gloom. In detailed projections, they show a way out. They point out that we could bring population growth to a halt in the next century and even, if we wish, turn it around. Fertility would have to come

gradually down to an average of 1½ children — this would result if we would “stop at two” — and annual net immigration would have to be limited to 200,000 (somewhat lower than the level that prevailed for much of this century). I find this an encouraging thought. Population planning alone will not solve all our problems, but the problems won't be solved if we do not bring the engine of population growth to a halt.

A population policy will not materialize by itself. We must persuade our national political leaders to face their obligations to their own people and to their descendants. They need to pass new legislation, and to enforce the laws we have.

The authors are concerned about the third world, caught in a population explosion, and they

would make family planning assistance the first priority in our foreign aid, but they argue that our primary responsibility lies at home. They believe the national goal should be first to avoid adding to the annual load of pollution and environmental damage, and then to reduce it.

Dr. Bouvier is a noted demographer, and Mr. Grant is a former State Department and National Security Council official. I commend the book to you. So does Congressman Tony Beilenson, co-chair of the Congressional Coalition on Population and Development. He says “Bouvier and Grant are absolutely right: population is *the* big issue... No one with hope for the future can afford to ignore this book.”

— Don Mann

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