NPG Forum

The Growth Management Delusion

by Dr. Gabor Zovanyi

The final quarter of the 20th century has been a period of unprecedented growth in the scale of the human enterprise and an era of attempting to cope with that growth by adopting growth management programs. During this time in the United States, local and state governments implemented thousands of growth management programs intended to manage the principal attributes of growth: amount, rate, location, and quality. Gabor Zovanyi's 1998 book, Growth Management for a Sustainable Future, *exposes the growth-accommodation bias of current growth management practices and makes a case for redirecting management efforts to a no-growth end based on ecological considerations. In this* Forum, *Dr. Zovanyi argues that growth management must abandon its support for the growth imperative, reject the false belief that management will make ongoing growth possible, and accept the need for basing future growth management on the imperative of ecological sustainability.*

Introduction

During the 1960s and 1970s an ideological shift occurred in America with respect to the value of further growth. The traditional association of population, economic, and urban growth with societal progress began giving way to a new and more skeptical view. This ideological shift did not come easily; conventional thinking had historically associated ongoing growth with a range of benefits, including stronger local economies, higher personal incomes, lower taxes, greater upward economic mobility for the poor, and a wider range of lifestyle choices for consumers. Despite these supposed benefits, increasing numbers of Americans were rejecting the view that growth was only beneficial during this period. Their personal experiences led them to associate growth with overcrowded schools, tax increases, rising crime rates, physical blight, traffic congestion, the loss of open space, the destruction of a way of life, and increasing air and water pollution.

This ideological shift in American attitudes toward growth began to affect popular perceptions regarding land development. Uses of land were increasingly being linked to a number of specific societal problems during this period. Growth, as manifested in the development of land, was being blamed for such diverse problems as the costly and destructive development pattern associated with urban sprawl, the loss of prime agricultural land,

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an inefficient provision of public facilities and services, escalating housing prices, pervasive environmental degradation, and the loss of community character. Growth management suggested an avenue for addressing these ill effects.

The growth management movement that emerged during the late 1960s and early 1970s reflected a direct response to this new ideological position. Most participants in the movement had come to think of growth as something to be managed, regulated, or controlled, rather than simply promoted as in the past. Different conventional definitions of growth management refer to governmental programs that *influence*, *guide*, *channel*, *redistribute*, *regulate*, or *control* future growth. Embedded in these definitions is the belief that it is possible to accommodate ongoing growth in a responsible fashion if we merely manage the amount, rate, location, and quality of future development. What is missing from the literature on growth management is a definition of manage-

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ment activity directed at a deliberate attempt to *stop* growth. This omission reflects the fact that the growth management movement has not entertained the possibility of a no-growth focus for growth management efforts. The movement has instead been directed at making ongoing growth possible and acceptable. In order to consider a case against the growth-accommodation focus of current growth management in the United States, one must first appreciate the degree to which growth management represents continuing support for the growth imperative that pervades U.S. social and political structures.

The Current Nature of Growth Management in the United States

Since the 1970s there has been widespread experimentation with growth management by cities and counties in the United States. These local governments have utilized their authority to plan and regulate the use of land to further growth management ends. In some instances they have actually limited the *amount* of future growth by downzoning land, that is, by reducing the permitted intensity of use on specific parcels of land. However, downzoning has typically been accompanied by increasing density allowances on other parcels deemed more suitable for development. In a minority of cases, communities moved to introduce *rate* controls, attempting to gain control over the timing of future development by limiting the annual number of building permits. These rate controls were assumed to buy time to respond to concerns about the availability, quality, and financing of public facilities and services, and to slow growth sufficiently to allow it to be absorbed without destroying community character or a current way of life. The majority of local growth management programs have, however, focused on directing the *location* of future growth. Many programs have assumed that containing new growth within designated growth boundaries would further a number of desired public ends, such as holding down facility and service costs, conserving resource lands, and protecting environmentally-sensitive lands from sprawl development. Other communities have emphasized the role that adequate facilities and services play in ensuring *quality* development, making development permission contingent on the availability of public facilities and services, and requiring developers to share the cost of providing that infrastructure. In the end, growth management programs have been deployed to manage all of the principal attributes of growth: amount, rate, location, and quality.

Although growth management on the part of local governments has represented increased regulation of private property in the United States, it has not served to stop or significantly slow ongoing growth. Even where management programs have deployed rate controls to slow growth, new annual growth allotments effectively permitted growth to continue. With most management activity directed at influencing the location and quality of development, rather than its amount or rate, growth management has been able to maintain an allegiance to the growth imperative. One survey of city and county management programs during the mid-1970s claimed it had been unable to detect a single program directed at stopping growth (Finkler and Peterson, 1974). Another survey of 586 growth management measures through 1989 similarly documented the growth-accommodation bias of city and county growth management activities (Glickfeld and Levine 1991). While 17% of those 586 measures temporarily limited the amount of growth by imposing annual caps on growth, 83% of the measures managed growth by geographically redistributing it using infrastructure requirements and urban limit lines. That practice has not changed during the 1990s. Most local management programs seek to reduce neither the overall amount or rate of growth, and instead reflect the belief that growth can be accommodated if its location is properly planned and its most obvious negative effects appropriately mitigated. Whether local governments are managing growth in the absence of state legislation directing that activity, or managing growth under the guidelines of a statewide growth management law, the overwhelming majority of local management programs have played an active role in accommodating ongoing growth.

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Although local governments are the principal players in implementing growth management programs in the United States, some state governments have passed laws asserting a state role in growth management activity. At present, 11 states have statewide growth management laws: Hawaii (1961), Vermont (1970 & 1988), Florida (1972 & 1985), Oregon (1973), New Jersey (1985), Maine (1988), Rhode Island (1988), Georgia (1989), Washington (1990 & 1991), Maryland (1992), and Tennessee (1998). These enabling acts specify what local governments are required to do, and what they may elect to do, as they engage in growth management activity. In many respects these statewide laws have addressed the same concerns that many local governments had attempted to address prior to the passage of state enactments governing growth management. The state laws universally contain provisions for protecting the environment. Most have elements intended to conserve resource lands. Many include containment components designed to achieve compact growth patterns and combat sprawl. Some of the state laws have sections to ensure "concurrency," or the provision of facilities and services at the time development occurs. Most have features that promote economic development in response to declining federal revenues under the new federalism, and features intended to balance development and environmental protection. However, the state laws have extended beyond matters previously addressed by local growth management efforts implemented in the absence of statewide guidelines.

The Growth Orientation of Statewide Growth Management Laws

Hawaii	(1961)	x[a]
Vermont	(1970 & 1988)	x
Florida	(1972 & 1985)	x[a]
Oregon	(1973)	x[a]
New Jersey	(1985)	x[b]
Maine	(1988)	x[a]
Rhode Island	(1988)	x[a]
Georgia	(1989)	x
Washington	(1990 & 1991)	x[a]
Maryland	(1992)	x[a]
Tennessee	(1998)	x[a]

x Statewide laws contain provisions intended to promote ongoing growth.

X[a] Legislative provisions actually mandate growth accommodation measures on the part of local governments.

X[b] Acknowledges limits for further growth within specific locations within the state, but maintains traditional accommodative stance for the remainder of the state.

Statewide growth management laws all contain provisions requiring local management programs to be consistent with specified state goals and policies. These provisions have provided a form of mandated direction for local management programs that did not exist prior to the passage of the state laws. Some of the state enactments have also required local governments to regulate land in a manner consistent with previously adopted local comprehensive plans, which has served to grant legal status to local land-use plans and reduce the possibilities for arbitrary and capricious regulatory behavior by local governments. Some of the statewide laws additionally required local governments to plan for controversial land uses such as affordable housing and factious public facilities like prisons. What all the statewide growth management laws have in common, however, is their continued commitment to preserving the growth imperative. All of the statewide management laws passed to date contain provisions intended to promote ongoing growth, and in 8 of the 11 states the laws actually mandate ongoing growth accommodation by local governments. In the state of Washington, for example, local urban growth boundaries are required to be adjusted every 10 years to accommodate the next 20 years of state-projected growth. All statewide growth management laws therefore reinforce the accommodative nature of the majority of local management programs implemented to date.

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an institutionalized form of support for the growth imperative. Most growth management programs are directed at a "managing to grow" option, rather than toward actual efforts to limit or stop future growth. The movement can, therefore, be criticized as representing little more than ongoing development facilitation. Spokespersons for the movement continue to defend the view that ongoing growth and environmental protection represent equally legitimate objectives, and that a "balance" can be achieved between these ends without compromising either. They also advocate the oxymoronic ideas of "sustainable growth" and "smart growth" at a time when ongoing growth is revealing itself to be lethal to other species and natural ecosystems. Even though current ecological realities clearly indicate that just managing ongoing growth is an insufficient response to the escalating nature of growth-induced environmental problems, the growth management movement remains wedded to accommodative management practices.

Inadequacy of the "Management" Response to Growth

As this century comes to a close, evidence mounts that we have gone beyond ecological limits to growth. Even the present scale of the human enterprise has affected ozone depletion and global climate change. By the 1990s researchers were making a case that even present rates of resource extraction and pollution emission were environmentally unsustainable (Meadows et al., 1992). In the same period other researchers were detailing the nature of pervasive environmental constraints to further growth: diminished fertility of existing agricultural lands, overgrazed grasslands, overharvested fisheries, depleted and polluted water sources, and truncated natural forests (Brown et al., 1994). During the 1990s other assessments indicated humans were losing ground in feeding an expanding global population (Brown and Kane, 1994). The decade also witnessed researchers arguing that even the current human population is living off the planet's capital rather than its income, and that living on that capital was producing serious environmental deterioration (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 1991). Underlying virtually all of these arguments for current limits to growth is the recognition that the present scale of the human enterprise is threatening the planet's life-support systems.

The planet's ecosystems constitute humanity's life-support apparatus. All life is utterly dependent on these ecosystems to support it, and the continued existence of our species, economy, and civilization is not exempt from such dependency. For ecologists the entire biosphere constitutes an ecosystem, as do the innumerable local biotic communities and the physical environments with which the organisms in these communities interact. Natural ecosystems provide a wide variety of essential services that are delivered free. These ecosystems maintain a benign mix of atmospheric gases, regulate the hydrologic cycle, purify air and water, generate and maintain fertile soils, dispose of wastes, recycle nutrients, provide pest control and pollination services, supply forest products and food from the oceans, and create and maintain biodiversity (Ehrlich and Ehrlich, 1991). As the unrelenting expansion of the human enterprise takes over more and more of the natural landscapes which comprise ecosystems, we lose both physical environments and biodiversity, and in the process diminish the very life-support functions on which we depend.

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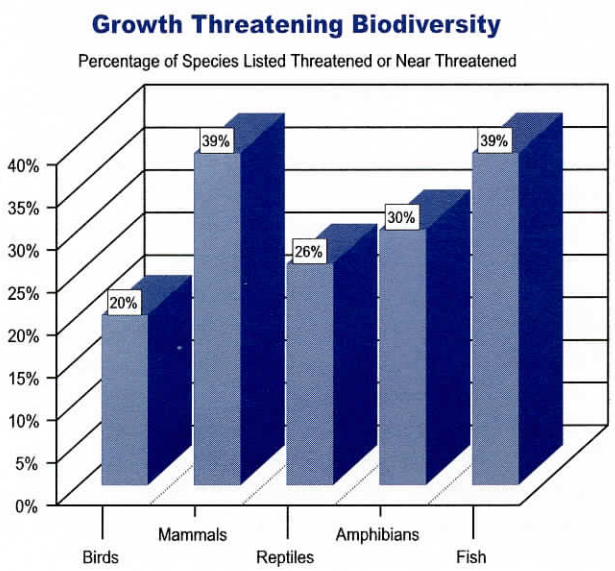
Evidence of the extent to which our species is eliminating the world's ecosystems and thereby reducing their vital services is revealed by the increasing resources we are required to commit to such things as sewage treatment, air purification, flood control, pest control, restoration of soil nutrients, and the preservation of species. Another indicator of the extent to which humans are con-

verting natural ecosystems to human-dominated ones, and thereby diminishing their vital services, comes from research into how much of the biological activity of the planet has been appropriated for the use of human beings. Research has investigated the extent of this appropriation by assessing human impact on the planet's total supply of energy produced by photosynthesis, that is global net primary production (NPP). Global net primary production is the total amount of solar energy converted into biochemical energy through plant photosynthesis minus the energy used by plants for their own processes. NPP represents the basic food source of all life, and research published in 1986 revealed our species had already commandeered about 40 percent of all potential NPP generated on land (Vitousek et al., 1986). This 40 percent appropriation of NPP directly correlates with estimates of the global level of land use by humans: humanity's use of nonpolar land for settlements, crops, permanent pastures, and woodlands now amounts to people already using at least 40 percent of the planet's land surface intensively.

As our species appropriates more and more of the planet, taking ever higher percentages of NPP and land area for its own use, the consequences for many other species is clear: extinction. It has been estimated that 15 to 20 percent of species have been eliminated during the last two decades of this century. Most of that loss is directly attributable to habitat destruction. Based on current and accelerating trends, estimates are that we may well see 50 percent of the remaining species on the planet disappear by 2050. In the 1990s the World Conservation Union's *Red Data Book* paints a sad picture for the world's animals, providing figures that illustrate how many already face threatened or near threatened status: birds (20%), mammals (39%), reptiles (26%), amphibians (30%), and fish (39%). The *Red Data Book* notes that one-third of all plants on the planet are currently threatened with extinction. This sorry state of the world's fauna and flora is not limited to areas outside of the United States. The Nature Conservancy currently tells its members that one-third of all plants and animals in America are facing extinction. This ongoing loss of life on the planet is directly attributable to the growth of the human enterprise.



In terms of urban growth, the United Nations estimates that from 20 to 30 million people a year now stream off the rural landscape into the urban centers of developing countries, adding to the significant natural increases occurring in these cities.

As long as the growth imperative spins off population, economic, and urban growth at exponential rates, it will displace natural ecosystems at exponential rates, and in turn push the number of extinctions to increase exponentially. Life on this planet simply cannot sustain the expansion of the human enterprise experienced during recent decades. Global population that was increasing by some 42 million people a year in 1950 jumped up to an annual increase of about 82 million a year by the latter 1990s. Global population increased by 112 percent during that 40 year period (from 2.5 to 5.3 billion), and the 2.8 billion added in that mere four decades surpassed the 2.5 billion reached in the prior 3 million years. While population increased by 112 percent, global industrial output increased fivefold. From an annual production of some 10 million motor vehicles a year in 1950, the number exploded to over 50 million vehicles a year in the 1990s. In terms of urban growth, the United Nations estimates that from 20 to 30 million people a year now stream off the rural landscape into the urban centers of developing countries, adding to the significant natural increases occurring in these cities.

While most of the aforementioned growth has occurred outside the United States, the degree of growth here has nevertheless been substantial. From 1950 to 1990 the population of America increased from some 150 million to about 250 million. Over 10 million of the 50 million vehicles produced annually are produced in the United States. And in terms of urban growth, the current annual increase of at least 2.5 million people a year translates into 25 cities of 100,000 every twelve months. Attempting to maintain these rates of growth will certainly occur at the expense of other life forms. In California, population increased from 10 million in 1950 to almost 30 million in 1990. The impact of that past growth on plants and animals in that state is reflected by the fact there are more threatened and endangered species listed federally there than in any other state. California's population is projected to increase to 64 million by 2040, and it is time to concede that mere "management" of such ongoing growth will not stop it from being lethal for many species that still struggle to survive there. The 25 million Americans added during the last decade of this century are stressing habitats and eliminating species nationwide, and the projected increase to almost 400 million Americans by 2050 will certainly eliminate significant biodiversity in the United States.

The fact that even the present scale of the human enterprise is serving to kill off a sizable portion of the nonhuman life on the planet, and in the process acting to degrade the life-support systems needed to sustain our own species, provides proof of the unsustainable nature of growth at the end of this century. It is time to recognize that the pursuit of physical growth has now become an obsolete and lethal ideology, and that we must abandon the growth imperative if we are to survive. Mere management of ongoing growth must be acknowledged to be an insufficient response to the ecological realities of the late 20th century. Those realities dictate that humans must shift their emphasis from the current ongoing growth accommodation advanced by the growth management movement to a new focus on overseeing the required downsizing and redesigning of the human enterprise to a level and form that is ecologically sustainable.

The first operational measure of ecological sustainability is therefore clear: no further loss of biodiversity due to anthropogenic causes.

A New Ecological Focus for Growth Management

Ecologists refer to the present as an Era of Impoverishment. They describe what our species is doing to the natural world as "a global biological holocaust of unthinkable proportions" and "biological meltdown." Based upon these revelations we must concede that a point in history has been reached where the continued elimination of species and ecosystems must be condemned by all reasonable persons as insane behavior. From an ecological perspective, which in the long run is the only one that matters, our behavior is simply unsustainable. Humanity's war on the community of life and the habitats that support it must end if our species hopes to experience an indeterminate future. In order to keep that option open, ecological sustainability must become the primary focus of both the growth management movement and society at large.

An ecological focus suggests a few key operational measures for directing the transition to a state of ecological sustainability. Since preserving the diversity of life is a necessary condition for ecological sustainability, actions that serve to reduce biodiversity are by definition ecologically unsustainable. The first operational measure of ecological sustainability is therefore clear: *no further loss of biodiversity due to anthropogenic causes*. Since maintaining the integrity of ecosystems is also a necessary condition for ecological sustainability, actions that serve to reduce the number or integrity of ecosystems are by definition ecologically unsustainable as well. This reasoning yields another operational measure of ecological sustainability: *no further loss of ecosystems or impairment of their continued productivity and functioning due to anthropogenic causes*. Since even the current scale of the human enterprise is eliminating species and ecosystems, further growth in that scale is also by definition ecologically unsustainable. The last operational measure of ecological sustainability is therefore clear: *an ongoing reduction in the scale of the human enterprise to a level capable of being supported indefinitely without eroding biodiversity or the integrity of ecosystems.*

The growth management movement, in short, represents a wholehearted endorsement of ongoing growth accommodation.

If progress is to be made in realizing these operational measures our species will have to abandon the growth imperative and adopt an alternative: *the imperative of ecological sustainability*. As the unequivocal primacy of ecological sustainability is accepted, the necessity of rejecting the growth imperative will become increasingly self-evident. It must be recognized that our species can persist without growth, but not without sustainable ecosystems. If people can accept this obvious truism, the requisite transition from the artificial growth imperative to the indispensable ecological imperative can finally occur.

At present the growth management movement impedes the essential transition from the growth imperative to the ecological imperative. The overwhelming majority of management programs have allowed, facilitated, or actually mandated ongoing growth accommodation. The movement remains committed to the assumed wisdom of future growth, and has evidenced no receptivity to the idea that management efforts might legitimately be directed at stopping growth. A no-growth option for management programs has, in fact, been written off by members of the movement, repeatedly being characterized as inefficient, unjust, and irresponsible. Even management programs that have sought only to limit future growth, as an alternative to actually stopping it, have been attacked by members of the movement and referred to as the worst, unenlightened, unrealistic, immature, and improperly defined programs. *The growth management movement, in short, represents a wholehearted endorsement of ongoing growth accommodation* (Zovanyi, 1998).

Members of the movement continue to defend "balanced growth," "smart growth," and "sustainable growth" at a time when escalating growth-induced problems increasingly demonstrate the irresponsible nature of ongoing growth accommodation practices. If the growth management movement is to become relevant to the needs of the current era, it will have to abandon the delusional position that it will be possible to protect the environment under ongoing growth. Psychiatrists define delusion as a false, persistent belief maintained in spite of evidence to the contrary. The growth management movement represents continued support of ongoing growth in spite of mounting evidence that growth no longer represents a viable policy option or survival strategy. A point has been reached in human history where further population, economic, and urban growth must be rejected if we are to preserve the biodiversity that sustains us. If growth management is unable to undergo a paradigm shift based on a rejection of the growth imperative, it will loose its social relevance and be replaced by activity more in tune with needs of the current era. The movement's present focus on ongoing growth accommodation is both irrelevant and irresponsible, and its mission must become one of stopping the growth that is dismantling the web of life on this planet.

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Transforming growth management into a no-growth endeavor will not come easily. The federal government has abstained from entering the growth management arena, and its endorsement of ongoing growth for the country makes it an unlikely advocate of actions intended to stop growth at any point in the foreseeable future. Statewide growth management laws passed to date have tended to mandate ongoing growth accommodation, and in the short term other states might be expected to copy these existing pro-growth statutes. Only local governments appear likely candidates for experimenting with growth management efforts designed to stop growth. In local settings, advocates of a no-growth position can lobby to change the growth accommodation biases of comprehensive land-use plans and regulation that make ongoing growth both possible and inevitable. While changing these land-use documents to reflect no-growth ends will undoubtedly be difficult, they will have to be changed if we are to create a sustainable future.

Notes

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