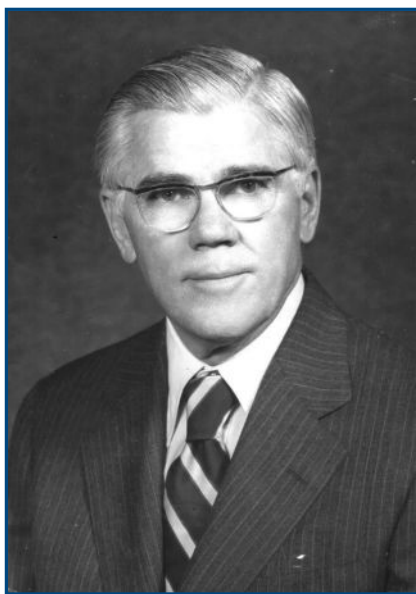


Don Mann: A Career of Facing Our Current Predicament

by Alan Saly



Donald Mann, President of Negative Population Growth, has expressed alarm at humanity's current predicament as a result of runaway growth in numbers. He observed that many millennials are having second thoughts about having children because of their insecurity about what the future will hold. "We should be paying more attention to future generations,"

says Mr. Mann, "because they're not in a position to do anything about it."

Today people are not as quick to dismiss Don Mann's vision of a bleak future as they were ten years ago. "There's not going to be enough resources to go around," he says. "Because of overpopulation, it's going to be pretty tough sledding."

Writing decades before Al Gore asserted his inconvenient truth, Don Mann, along with well-regarded scientists, some of them Nobel Prize winners, put forward the intellectual blueprint for a wide-ranging discussion on how to reduce and reverse population growth, founding his organization, Negative Population Growth or NPG, in 1972. Noted polymath Isaac Asimov was one of the champions, as was Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson, who founded Earth Day. Former U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Environment and Population Lindsey Grant and former U.S. Department of State diplomat David Simcox were also extremely influential.

Don was born in Pine Bluff, Arkansas. He recalled, "My father was unable to go to college but he was very bright and invented one of the first gumball vending machines. He went to Chicago with it and made a lot of money." However, after the depression hit and fortunes decreased, the family relocated to St. Petersburg, Florida.

After attending a local college, Mann was able to enroll in Wesleyan University. His memories of college include playing on the basketball team, waiting on tables at the school cafeteria and attending a farewell dinner where a retiring English professor remarked, "Don Mann can quote more Chaucer than most of us have ever read."

At Wesleyan he became acquainted with Shakespeare and French writers. "One of the real pleasures in my life is reading the works of Moliere," he says, holding the plaster bust of the playwright that he keeps on his desk. He also has a well-read leather-bound pocket edition of Dante's *Divine Comedy* close at hand.

Following Don's graduation from Wesleyan, he enlisted in the Navy and was placed in an amphibious division as an officer. All of their divisions were ordered to Omaha Beach at the time of the Allied landings in Normandy. D-day had passed but the battle was still raging on. Don recalls seeing the beach littered with dead bodies. His group was responsible for removing the dead and taking the wounded to the ship hospital. Experts now estimate that about 2,400 were killed, wounded, or missing at Omaha beach alone.

Following his Navy career, Don returned to the U.S. and studied philosophy in graduate school at Columbia University. He then went to France to attend further graduate studies and to learn the French language. While there, he met his prospective wife, married and started a family. With a family to support, he moved around between France, Morocco, Lebanon, and Germany, perfecting his French and working in sales at General Tires and in real estate back in the U.S.

On a trip back to New York, Don's thoughts and experiences seemed to crystallize. He recalls, "I was coming back from France and had seen how devastated things were, due to war and over-exploitation of resources. It seemed obvious to me that on a finite planet, with limited resources, growth cannot continue forever. A continually exploding population would eventually deplete nature, leading to catastrophic reverses for mankind." He points out that postwar America was primed for growth. Paul Ehrlich's 1968 book, *The Population Bomb*, updating the theories of Malthus, helped usher in the environmental movement but was debunked as alarmist.

Mann felt that Zero Population Growth, founded in 1968, wasn't going far enough to address his concerns. Isaac Asimov was on record with studies advising that no more than 100 million people could live in America without causing irreparable damage to our natural ecosystems. Keeping to that number—less than a third of the country's current population size—would protect our rivers, aquifers and wilderness areas, that in turn provide the space for people to live in harmony with nature, without crowding out the many species that live among us.

Mann began writing essays on population growth and overcrowding in America and sent them to several scientists and academics. He received positive responses and professors at Columbia agreed to write papers for his fledgling organization. Those went to a "huge list of scientists" and many responded with encouragement and funding, allowing Mann to incorporate NPG in 1972.

At 51, Mann was ready to devote his energies full-time to building the political and social consensus for a U.S. population policy that would lead to a sustainable world. Marshaling the intellectual resources of dozens of environmentalists, economists, and scientists, he brought them together in what amounted to a public brain trust. He invited the experts to write on such topics as soil erosion, groundwater resources, traffic and urban sprawl, air and water pollution, human fertility, and immigration. Ten- to twelve-page NPG Forum papers were sent to NPG members, schools and libraries, newspapers and Congress. NPG sponsored contests for students to write essays on the consequences of living in a crowded world. It placed op-eds in major papers, encouraged members to write letters to the editor and provided resource materials for environmental activists opposing growth in their states or cities.

What measures does NPG advocate? One paper, picked more or less at random, written by San Diego State Professor John Weeks and published in 1992, provides several recommendations to address fertility. They include providing full legal rights to women, increasing the legal age for marriage, legalizing abortion, and distributing of birth control methods at all health clinics.

With U.S. fertility dropping in the 80s and 90s, along with that of other developed nations, NPG recognized that were it not for immigration, U.S. population growth would be negative.

Continued high levels of immigration, however, indicated that the opposite would result.

A graph created by David Simcox and published in Lindsey Grant's book, *Elephants in the Volkswagen*, shows the projection of 1.5 million new immigrants each year. The graph precisely predicted today's U.S. population number of over 300 million. By contrast, if immigration had been held equal to emigration, the graph shows that there would be only 220 million.

When asked about the climate change movement, Mann says, "It's odd that people don't want to recognize that population is the central issue here. In a small world with limits, endless growth is not possible. That's the answer but it's pretty hard for people to accept that. I would tell today's Wesleyan students, as well as everyone else, that population growth is the most important issue you can address."

Soon to become a centenarian, Mann has seen great changes in the world over the course of his many years. Likely most disturbing to him would be the addition of more than five billion people to our fragile planet, with more than 200 million added to the U.S. alone in his lifetime. While these are shocking numbers, Mann's creation of NPG and its broad public education programs surely caused these numbers to be lower than they would have been otherwise.

The staff, directors, and members of NPG are eternally grateful for his strength and demeanor in what has always been a challenging course. Lindsey Grant honored Don in his 1992 book, *Elephants in the Volkswagen*, by stating: "This book is affectionately dedicated to Donald Mann, who has fought the good fight." Don, we could not agree more.

*We warmly acknowledge
NPG member and activist
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personally interview Don
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