

THE VERDICT IS IN: TO BE ANTI-GROWTH IS TO BE PRO-HUMANITY

An NPG Forum Paper
by Dr. Karen I. Shragg

“Life has taught me not to shoot messengers, no matter how bad and discouraging the news. It is more important to pay attention to those crafting the message!”

- *Louis Yako*

Abstract: Current accusations of injustice and racism against those who work to tame overpopulation and its detrimental effects on the environment, the economy and quality of life are unfounded. Actually, the opposite represents the truth. Those who work on this overwhelming and difficult issue are motivated by a desire for a better world for all species and a fear that ignoring it will be our downfall.

Key Words: Cancel Culture, Anti-Growth /De-Growth Activists, Overpopulation Activists, Social Justice Warriors, Wokesters

THE ISSUE: THE CANCELING OF OVERPOPULATION ACTIVISTS

For too many years unjustified accusations have flown at those of us who have been beating the overpopulation drum. The worst of those, “The People Who Hate People,” (*The Atlantic*) inspired this paper.¹ At best our meager lot of degrowth and overpopulation activists are told we only care about trees and wildlife at the expense of human rights. At worst we are labeled racists and just plain anti-human. This is an expedient way to shut down a much-needed conversation, avoid the truth and any hope of solving what is behind our booming environmental crisis. It is a lazy discourse at best and environmentally damaging at its worst. Those on the far left of the spectrum point their self-righteous fingers at the anti-growth/overpopulation activists and shame them for blaming the poor instead of going after those in the developed world for living relatively luxurious lives. In so many circles, from academia to the major media outlets, it is now more politically correct to go after

air conditioning than it is to wave the family planning flag.

Journalist and author Bari Weiss speaks extensively about the trap of cancel culture. She describes the damage it is doing to our democracy and its abuse of the first amendment’s guarantee to free speech. She describes this dangerous movement this way:

“Ideas are replaced with identity. Forgiveness is replaced with punishment. Debate is replaced with disinvitation and de-platforming. Diversity is replaced with homogeneity of thought. Inclusion with exclusion. Excellence with equity.

In this ideology, disagreement is recast as trauma. So speech is violence. But violence, when carried out by the right people in pursuit of a just cause, is not violence at all – but in fact justice. In this ideology, bullying is wrong, unless you are bullying the right people, in which case it’s very, very good. In this ideology, information that does not comport with The Narrative is recast as

disinformation, its proponents as conspiracy theorists. In this ideology, education is not about teaching people how to think, it's about re-educating them in what to think. In this ideology the need to feel safe trumps the need to speak truthfully."²

This NPG Forum paper is a call for the need to create a safe discussion space for those who have a great depth of knowledge and concern about what our anthropocentric views and the untethered growth of the human enterprise is doing to the very possibility of even having a future on a planet we are systematically destroying.

To begin with, these critics have no idea what overpopulation is or that its effects are doing all the things they say they are against. Too many people hear overpopulation and immediately jump to the conclusion that this will become a scientific excuse to destroy people, especially those already marginalized. Without considering its biological definition, they assume that this whole concept is fuel for an evil perpetrator's desire to eliminate his or her designated enemies.

Overpopulation can, and does, happen to all species and humans are no exception. Humans are quintessential consumers and when their numbers are excessive their damage is also excessive. Any organism can exceed the carrying capacity of its habitat, because any and all habitats have limited space, sources of water, arable soil, etc. Overpopulation is not a fixed number. A Bedouin tribe, for instance, living and herding in a desert may have only 1,000 members, but because the environment is so harsh that number may represent an upper limit for them.

It's so unfortunate that today's academic climate and general public discourse are identity-based rather than evidence-based. If they were based on evidence, it would be relatively easy to point out that overpopulation is caused by more births than deaths over time, reduced mortality due to an increase in medical advances, increased immigration and decreased emigration. It results in a scarcity of resources which in turn causes an increase in misery and suffering. Here is a list of just some of the negative effects of overpopulation: loss of fresh water, species extinction, lower life expectancy in the fastest growing countries, depletion of natural resources, increased emergence of epidemics and pandemics, less freedom and more restrictions, more intensive farming practices, increased habitat loss, increased global warming and climate change, and elevated crime

rates.³ To those who wonder how I can work on such a challenging issue, I tell them with one issue I am able to address a myriad of ills, all with the intention of being very pro-humanity.

It is not just illogical to suggest that those who are working to prevent all of the maladies listed above are anything but warriors for justice both in their actions and intent, it is outrageous.

When critics like Demsas in the aforementioned *Atlantic* article, label overpopulation activists as being unfair to the poor and marginalized, it is a very narrow-minded argument. A deeper look would reveal deep care and concern. Sir David Attenborough frequently points out that humans are destroying the life-giving forces of the earth with both their numbers and habits. He is a patron of England's NGO Population Matters. He is quoted on their website as saying, "All of our environmental problems become easier to solve with fewer people, and harder – and ultimately impossible to solve with ever more people."⁴ To say that Sir Attenborough, who has devoted his life to making us aware of how we depend on a healthy natural world, is anything but righteously motivated is deeply offensive.

CANCEL CULTURE IS SELF-SERVING, NOT EARTH SERVING

Comedian Bill Burr in his latest Netflix special from Red Rocks pokes fun at what he calls 'wokesters' saying that the very word "woke" was stolen by Whites from Black culture wanting to show that they were down with the struggle. His humorous critique of cancel culture is well timed. He has a funny bit about how they are going so far as to cancel celebrities who have been dead for years. I give this overboard wokeness regarding the degrowth/ overpopulation movement the acronym; W-willing to O-ostracize K-kind E-environmentalists, for I know many and they are all kind, undeserving of the dismissiveness and canceling thrown at them. This wokeness disease has infected many an environmental organization – many of which are now afraid to address the root cause of environmental problems and instead are keeping their focus on the diversity of their boards. The Sierra Club has been accused of taking money from the oil fracking industry, and of straying from their mission, but what really got them in trouble in our current political climate is their internal staffing struggles.⁵

I need look no further about being canceled than my own experiences. I have been told I can't be on my city's sustainability commission because I want

to focus on how development is something we should stop attracting. I have been asked to not join a newly formed national alternative environmental group because of my focus on this issue. I have been uninvited to national conferences put on by ecological societies because I have been deemed an overpopulation pariah and they wish to wash their hands of my kind.

As comedian Dana Carvey's Church Lady character would say, "Isn't that special!" or more appropriately, "How convveeenient." If our intentions as overpopulation activists are deemed nefarious, no one has to listen or accept blame for things going south so quickly. The truth is, if we were truly anti-human and racist our best approach to this issue would be to remain silent and just watch the continued collapse of all we hold dear. Collapse will always find the marginalized first. They are already living in the valleys which will become flooded and have the least economic resilience.

FUZZY MATH AND EXPONENTIAL GROWTH

Overpopulation is a steam roller which does its damage without attracting much attention. Exponential growth on a limited planet to the tune of 80 million more passengers a year, translated to 220,000 every day is a ticking time bomb and to do nothing is actually the most effective way to allow the devastation to continue.

Many often say that population rates are declining globally and therefore anyone raising this issue must be using it to dismiss people of color. But percentage rates are misleading. Just a 1% growth rate on 7.8 billion people represents 78 million additional consumers each year, which is approximately our current rate of global population increase. A bigger percentage say 3% on 2 billion would be 60 million additional people, so the rate is totally dependent on the amount of people already here. Population rates vary around the world and rates of increase are relative to the base number.⁶ The current volume of people is so large that a reduction in the rate of growth is not a cause for celebration for as we near 8 billion even a smaller growth rate remains harmful.

USING OVERCONSUMPTION AS AN EXCUSE FOR INACTION

The racial spin some critics love to toss our way is to claim that Americans should be focused on their own overconsumption and not tell other countries what to do because that is like having white people

tell black people how many children to have. In a racist world the optics are admittedly initially distasteful. But dig a bit deeper and one discovers that while overconsumption happens on an embarrassing level here in the US, whether or not Jeff Bezos buys another yacht for his other yachts, will not determine whether residents of Cape Town, South Africa will have enough water to drink tomorrow. The guilty party is their growth of approximately 4 million residents since 1950.⁷

Florence Blondel would also beg to differ. This overpopulation activist is from Uganda and knows how much overpopulation is setting back her people. She is stunned when mostly white social justice warriors get upset when lowering birth rates in African countries is brought up. "I am irked when organizations ignore talking about population or when they talk about it and totally misunderstand what it's all about. I do not like when most assume that in low-income countries, or Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) in particular, where I am from, people do not mind the continuous unprecedented upsurge in numbers. Most people fighting against the discussion, especially people living in countries with high-income, make excuses like that's racist, eugenics, etc. I find the racist point an annoyance. What's racist about it? Have you been to our countries? Have you been to the rural areas which make up most of the countries? Have you smelt the stinking poverty and hunger? Noticed children hanging around their mothers hungry? Found a household with about 5 children under 5 years and another in the womb – with oldest girls married off at 13?"⁸

It is both arrogant and unproductive to think that we cannot offer to help people with their struggles in ways that have been proven with tools we already possess. Poverty reduction was the goal when restaurant owner Mechai Viravaidya, nicknamed the Condom King, started a successful family planning campaign in Thailand in 1974. Their national campaign had a slogan, "the more children, the poorer". They also used humor and lots of governmental support for education. While each country must have its programs tailor-made to fit its culture, he advised that using humor is a great tool. At his restaurants, he had a sign that said: "Sorry we are out of breath mints, please take a condom instead."⁹

In today's politically correct climate I am not sure the efforts of Thailand would be applauded as much as they were in the past. Going from a fertility rate of an average of 6 children per woman to 1.5 allowed

Thailand to become a more economically secure nation is a win for all, but nowadays someone somewhere is going to find a way to spin it as an act of coercion.

OUR TROUBLED FUTURE WITH WOKENESS AT THE WHEEL

Today we are more likely to look at downstream solutions for our environment and economic woes. This safer space for dialogue does little to improve our world. Rooftop gardens got some press last year (2021) because they offer jobs and cooler cities in Cairo, Egypt and Dhaka, Bangladesh. It's a feel-good story about using rooftops to grow food and offset oppressive heat. Not a word is mentioned about how they are such overpopulated countries and how working on population has to be included in the solution. Bangladesh is smaller in area than Wisconsin (5.8 million people) but has a population of 165 million. The city they are referring to, Dhaka, has over 22.5 million people which is the equivalent of 5 cities the size of Los Angeles crammed together.¹⁰

The president of Nigeria is very alarmed about Nigeria's population growth rate. Why would Nigerians want to reduce their own birth rates? Won't changing consumption habits in the US help the quality of life in the fastest-growing African nation? No, it will not, not enough and not fast enough. He knows that their high fertility rates are harming women and everyone's quality of life. He's a Nigerian who cares about his country, just like the rest of us who so clearly see the connection between human numbers and the quality of life. Earlier this year (2022) President Muhammadu Buhari initiated a new population policy for this north African country with the highest fertility rate on the entire continent. In a speech he said:

“The policy emphasizes the urgency to address Nigeria's sustained high fertility rate, through expanding access to modern family planning, counselling and commodities as well as promote births spacing. This will enable Nigeria to achieve rapid fertility control, improve the health of women, adolescents, newborns and children, and other population groups. These levels have implications for sustained population growth and narrowed prospects to achieving population management, facilitating sufficient demographic transition, harnessing our

demographic endowment and eventually realizing sustainable development.”¹¹

Good leaders can do the math. More than 72% of Nigerians are below the age of 30 while half of their female population are between 15-49 years. His focus on reducing their overpopulation problem reflects his deep concern for the future of his country.¹²

In a 2014 survey, the Pew Research Center discovered something interesting. “Asked whether or not the growing world population will be a major problem, 59% of Americans agreed it will strain the planet's natural resources, while 82% of U.S.-based members of the American Association for the Advancement of Science said the same.”¹³

So according to the theory that overpopulation is an issue for only those who don't care about people, we could draw from this research that scientists are more heartless than the rest of us. Of course, this is ridiculous. The only reason to be alarmed is because you care about the disaster that awaits humanity in an overpopulated and growing world. The conclusions that can be drawn are that the general public is not as concerned because they have been sheltered from honest discourse about this topic ever since the Rockefeller report on the negative effects of US population growth was shelved by the Nixon administration under pressure from Catholic Bishops.¹⁴ In addition, unlike scientists, they are not as schooled in ecology and its principles of carrying capacity and the exponential factor.

Paraphrasing Isaac Asimov, the overpopulation issue operates under its own weather system and is so detrimental to humanity that the best way to keep it on track to wipe us and our fellow creatures out is to do nothing. He points out that at least with nuclear war we have to do something. We are very busy doing nothing, and even busier making up reasons why we can't have decent, effective policies, many of which have been in the pipeline for a long time.

Without ecologically and morally justifiable laws in place to keep us in balance with the resources needed to survive, we will continue to grow to such an outrageous population size that conservation efforts will become increasingly ridiculous. We keep telling the public to be sure to wash out their peanut butter jars and shop with reusable bags, meanwhile we add over 200,000 new customers net gain to Mother Earth's limited store each day.

In the US it is becoming 'green' window dressing

to put in community gardens and roadside wildflowers, while we roll out the red carpet for thousands of new residents. In my city alone, the Twin City Metro Area of Minnesota in May of 2022, builders pulled permits to develop 1,529 apartments and other multi-family housing units which is a 450% increase just compared to last year. In contrast, demand for single-family units were down by 18%.¹⁴

There is no attention paid to the demands increasing housing density puts on our water supply, our traffic congestion or the increased need for human services of all kinds. While we smile at ribbon-cutting ceremonies these relocated earth customers will be in the process of draining our already stressed aquifers and adding to our traffic jams. It makes no sense that we have ordinances requiring alternate days for watering lawns while encouraging the addition of hundreds of new residents each year in arid, drought-stressed states who will be needing 82 gallons of fresh water per day just to live a decent modern life. We must be locally sustainable before we can ever hope to be globally so.

FIGHTING OVERPOPULATION IS AN ACT OF SOCIAL JUSTICE

The time is overdue to call out these social justice warriors. This is not a personal vendetta; it is about calling out their story which pushes us towards redistribution of resources rather than trying to ratchet down our numbers in order to avert catastrophe. While that would be a fine goal, writers like Leanne McNulty take it a step further claiming that to blame overpopulation for scarcity is a form of eco-fascism.¹⁵

If you want to help mankind, and prevent suffering, misery, and early death of humans you can do many things. You can be against the death penalty, pedophilia, sex trafficking, the sale of assault weapons to the public and the promotion of illicit drugs. You can question the ease with which we go to war with no game plan for ending the invasions of sovereign nations. All of these positions reflect my deeply held values. How is it that I can suddenly become racist or anti-human by promoting the idea that overpopulation is killing our future? I can't because I am not. I am the opposite of a racist, nor am I the enemy of all things human. Overpopulation causes ecocide. It is the unnamed, unblamed enemy of our present and future. It stresses resources, eliminates pollinators, adds to our carbon footprint, creates traffic, obliterates our scenic views, and

overcrowds our cities and parks. Trying to prevent this collective tragedy is nothing but noble.

We have all seen the photos of trains in India so overstuffed with passengers. In a span of 10 years, over 25,000 have fallen off these deathtraps and over 6,000 of these unfortunate souls died.¹⁶

Do we think we will somehow be protected from their fate in the developed world? Each year the US experiences more crowds, more pollution, more anonymity, less community, and more crime. All of these conditions are the result of the US population growing beyond the working capacity of our precious and irreplaceable resources including our now mythological wide-open spaces. The real finger pointing should be at those selling the fallacies that the US is limitless with much to offer newcomers. Decay is what lies ahead for a country unwilling to put its ecological foot down. Yes, we indeed may owe certain groups a lifeline because of our past or even current unfair and even evil acts, but we cannot offer up our country's future as penance. That lifeline needs to be in more sustainable forms.

Once we recognize that the US cannot take on the hundreds of millions who would like to come here, we can work to help countries with their overpopulation issues. According to the Population Institute, the UN projects population of the 48 poorest countries in the world will double from 850 million in 2010 to 1.7 billion in 2050. The US, and other developed nations, cannot take on the world's poor and offer them a better life.

THE BURDEN OF LARGE CITY LIVING

There are now over 31 cities in the world with populations of over 10 million and they are projected to keep increasing in number.¹⁷

I believe they are not places anyone in the US would choose to live. Research over and over again demonstrates that we are happier and healthier when we live in smaller communities.¹⁸ The Knight Foundation found that the following criteria were critical to a citizen's attachment to their community:

- Basic services – community infrastructure
- Local Economy
- Safety
- Leadership and elected officials
- Aesthetics – physical beauty and green spaces

- Education systems
- Social offerings – opportunities for social interaction and citizen caring
- Openness/welcomeness – how welcoming the community is to different people
- Civic involvement – residents’ commitment to their community through voting or volunteerism
- Social capital – social networks between residents

An article on Nature.com reports that “Increased overcrowding and population density were associated with higher levels of loneliness; in contrast, social inclusivity and contact with nature were associated with lower levels of loneliness. These associations remained significant after adjusting for age, gender, ethnicity, education and occupation.”¹⁹ Overpopulation is clearly the nemesis of trying to establish quality of life in our cities.

OUR BIOSPHERE MUST BE PRIORITIZED IF HUMANITY IS TO EXIST

An article very on point was printed in the *Journal of Future Studies*, (Sept. 2020, 25(1): 93–106). It addressed the motivations of those advocating to take our foot off the growth pedal. “Environmental scientists and scholars who point out the danger of overpopulation do so for two key reasons. The first is that this is causing ecocide and the extinction of life on Earth. The second is that the first reason is likely to lead to famine and war, and the major loss of human population... Thus, talking about overpopulation is not anti-human but *pro-human*. Population activism seeks to avoid mega-death (both human and nonhuman). Similarly, it wishes to avoid a situation where international conflict and war are increased. The ‘anti-human’ claim thus has no evidence or logic to support it.”²⁰

In my 2015 book, *Move Upstream, A Call to Solve Overpopulation*, Freethought House Press, I invited people to consider the big picture. I did not tell them to leave their values behind, but to accomplish them with a wider vision. An upstream view is to see not only what we are doing but why we are doing it. If I didn’t care about the biodiversity of this planet and its capacity to support us, I would take the George Carlin approach. I would get a lawn chair and make a big bag of popcorn and just watch the

circling of the drain. I would nod my head and say to whomever wanted to listen, “What did you expect when we add millions each year to a country which already can’t manage to provide for its citizens?” I do deeply care about this planet and its creatures and so do my fellow overpopulation activists. I am ready to go to the mat to challenge those who cannot see beyond their limited worldview. When their narrative of shame is examined through the lens of sustainability it becomes tarnished and is not just damaging to activists but to the future of those they think they are trying to protect.

The subtitle of Professor Trevor Hedberg’s 2020 book, *The Environmental Impact of Overpopulation* is “The Ethics of Procreation.” Many have already written about the morality of adding more children into an overcrowded, resource beleaguered world and I will site many of them here. They do so from a standpoint of saving humanity for welcoming in newcomers to a place which will not support them is an act of immorality.

The Fair Start Movement²¹ is aimed at overpopulation from the perspective of fairness to the child being brought into a world that may not be able to support them. This nonprofit is the poster child for demonstrating an ethical motivation to reduce births in the world. Their mission is literally described as “Child-first family planning means working with parents before they have kids, helping parents get the resources they need to give each child a fair start and promoting smaller, sustainable, and equitable families. It’s the best way to protect our future, for ourselves and for the people we love.”

Stop Having Kids, an NGO, reveals a righteous motivation right in its mission statement, “There’s no shortage of already existing humans and other animals in need of safe and loving homes, as well as so many other forms of support. Let’s minimize our harm and maximize our goodwill and solidarity with living beings and the planet.”²²

But when it comes to lobbing insults and canceling overpopulation activists you have to give the biggest trophy to those in the media, the social justice movement and even the green movement, population groups among them, who can’t seem to handle the truth about mass immigration. They treat those of us who work on this issue as if we had leprosy. Worse yet as described so well here, they are great at finding the wrong people to interview, keeping the myth alive that there is nothing to be won

by restricting immigration. Alice Friedemann the energy skeptic writes:

“Anyone who wants to limit immigration or population is portrayed as a racist. Have you ever seen anyone on TV or in newspapers who stated their reason for wanting reduced immigration and population was their concern over loss of biodiversity, increasing pollution, declining aquifers, fisheries, forests, energy, and other resources? And if they were allowed to speak about environmental issues, they would still be accused of hiding their REAL motivation, which was racism. Hell no. Only hateful racists are interviewed, and their views linked to eugenics, genocide, and colonialism. They are portrayed as not trying to curb all growth, but only that of undesirable people such as the poor or undesirable races. Many systems ecologists have estimated that without fossil fuels, the United States could support at most 100 million people. The media should be asking people how we can go from 320 million to 100 million without birth control, abortion, and limiting immigration.”²³

Mass immigration’s role in the contribution to growth from the developing to the developed world is well documented. According to the PEW Research Center, “Looking ahead, ...if current demographic trends continue, future immigrants and their descendants will be an even bigger source of population growth. Between 2015 and 2065, they are projected to account for 88% of the U.S. population increase, or 103 million people, as the nation grows to 441 million.”²⁴

These numbers are woefully ignored due to the assumption that those who are looking at the overwhelming numbers must have racist intentions. In fact, the opposite is true. Historically keeping immigration restrictions in place has helped the Black community to get and maintain jobs.

A review of Roy Beck’s 2021 book *Back of the Hiring Line, a 200-year history of immigration surges, employer bias and depression of Black wealth* sums it up this way: “150 years after the end of slavery and nearly 60 years after passage of the civil rights laws of the 1960s, average Black household wealth remains a fraction of the median assets of other racial, ethnic, and immigrant populations. There are many reasons, but this book is about one: two centuries of governmental encouragement of periodic

sustained surges in immigration.”²⁵

Many developed countries would be stabilizing their growth rates if it weren’t for immigration. If sustainability is truly the goal, then it must be dealt with within each country as that is where the laws are made. Climate change is already stressing every country on earth and overpopulation and its continued growth just adds fuel to this game-changing fire.

IT’S TIME TO QUIT THROWING SPEARS AND START WORKING TOGETHER

To be too anthropocentric is to not be anthropocentric at all. To focus our efforts to better the world exclusively on human welfare is to lose sight of our fragile biosphere. Spend a few minutes looking at the work the population groups and individuals are doing and it is easy to see how much better off we would be if more listened to the anti-growth call.

Overpopulation activists or anti-growthers, if you prefer, must address growth in all of its forms, both locally and globally. Growth is cultivated by high fertility rates and lack of women’s empowerment, immigration policies and oligarchic capitalism due to the way in which a handful of billionaires are running the country’s economic policies. Those who claim to have a stake in the social justice of the most vulnerable would do well to take a few ecology courses and see that they are setting up a house of cards which is destined to collapse and fall hardest on those with the least resiliency. If a better world is truly desired, it’s time to put down the rhetoric and see that joining forces is the best strategy going forward.

We don’t need double blind studies to teach us that hate is easier in an overpopulated world. We can’t get to know each other as human beings and as resources get scarcer it’s easier for hate to turn into violence. When social justice warriors get tired of slinging arrows and realize they are only accomplishing the dismantling of the first amendment, then perhaps they can partner with us, those who work hard to take our foot off the growth pedal. To demean and diminish those who work on overpopulation as racists or ecofascists is antithetical to the goals of all of us, to make the world a better more livable, more humane place in which to live.

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