

WHY ZPG DID NOT ACHIEVE ITS GOAL TO LOWER POPULATION & WHY WE CAN'T GROW-ON FOREVER

**An NPG Forum Paper
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ABSTRACT

American citizens who listened to the wisdom of ZPG (Zero Population Growth) back in the 1970s may be wondering if their decision to have a small family, 0-2 children, actually contributed to the lowering of US population. ZPG was founded in 1968 by biologist Paul Ehrlich, attorney Richard Bowers and entomologist Charles Remington following the release of Ehrlich's book *The Population Bomb*.¹ These were both influential in affecting the reproductive choices of a generation. In the 70s and beyond, many were soon convinced of their argument that population growth is the primary driver of environmental degradation. To commit to small families was the new narrative of the ultimate response to an ailing environment. This paper explores the failure of this to work due to the other factor, mass immigration, which has become a more powerful driver of growth in recent years. America continues to grow in population due to migration into the US, thereby undermining the ability of small family choices to achieve their original goal of population stabilization and reduction.

THE BENEFITS OF SMALLER FAMILIES

In addition to promoting sustainability by reducing demand on a finite environment, choosing to have zero, one or two kids has many personal benefits. Families can better afford to send their kids to college, take more vacations, and work less to spend more time with their offspring. On a societal level, less population growth translates into less traffic, less disruption from constant construction, less crowded cities, and less threats to wildlife – all of which contribute to an overall better quality of life. The problem is that those who helped get our birth rate lower have not reaped the collective benefits of a smaller population. Our cities are more crowded, our roads are more clogged, our National Parks need reservations months in advance and housing is in such great demand that only the very rich can compete in an inflated housing market.

GROWTH IN SPITE OF SMALLER FAMILIES

America's fertility rates have fallen from 2.54 in 1970 to a comfortable 1.66 children per female today. This has happened due to a variety of reasons. They include: changing roles for women in society with increased career opportunities; rising costs of additional children; and concern about the future world available to their progeny due to climate change and political unrest. However, even after more than 50 years of American parents making the decision to reduce their family size, the US population has not stabilized. On the contrary, the US has gained over 140 million people since the first Earth Day in 1970. The mystery of a rapidly-growing population amid the effort to have smaller families seems puzzling at first. If the average family size has been shrinking since the 1960s, then why does the US keep growing? How did we add the equivalent of

Russia's population to our 50 states in just 55 years?

Despite their best efforts to tame the high rates of population growth, these families that committed to a better future did not account for the push to grow our numbers through mass immigration. Many argue that immigration doesn't matter because the overall population of the world remains the same. True enough, but keeping limits on growth is a local challenge best addressed with local laws and enforcement. The US cannot be the release valve for other countries. It does little to help underdeveloped/overpopulated countries and causes much harm to our already bloated country, which currently has an estimated 342,300,000 people. Bangladesh is a prime example. It is a country of 167 million people crammed into a geographic area smaller than the state of Wisconsin. This is why it is awash in extreme poverty and suffering. If Wisconsin had that many people instead of the almost 6 million already living within its borders, it would also be a state exploding with pollution, poverty and suffering. From our vantage point in the US, there isn't much we can do to help countries in the same overpopulated predicament. Even allowing 1 million people to emigrate legally to our country would do little to relieve their problems. It would however cause more problems here at home by adding to our already overpopulated nation.

We used to be able to have somewhat of an impact on international overpopulation before 1994, when the women's movement shifted the focus from global population issues to women's empowerment. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) used to be an avenue for addressing global overpopulation. But now it is focused mainly on the empowerment of women and making sure they can make their own choices.

Tony Povilitis from Scale Down said in his latest article called, *When Storks Don't Oblige*, that UNFPA is all about affirming "...the rights of individual women and men to make their own choices as to when, how and whether to have children." Its focus is on "both preventing unintended pregnancies and enabling intended pregnancies...[as] both require supportive environments, policies and norms. Unfortunately, UNFPA fails to consider that population growth may run counter to improving human health, reducing poverty, and fostering healthy relationships between

partners. Moreover, it is clueless or doesn't care about the impacts that vast human numbers have on other-than-human life."

Because of this unfortunate change in focus at UNFPA, it is now nearly impossible to effect much change in Bangladesh or other countries being strangled with the ravages of overpopulation. We are therefore called upon to take responsibility where we live and navigate the world, in our own backyard, made up of our towns, cities, counties, states and at the national level. Human numbers are best controlled locally with the legal and cultural tools available within each country.

This has become a hot-button topic, as the 'woke' cancel culture, embraced by much of the left in recent years, will not listen to those advocating for sensible immigration from a sustainability perspective. This dismissal has been explained by many a political pundit as a contributing factor to the Democrats' defeat in the last election. Fed up with the relentless pouring of immigrants over the border, many turned to Trump's border rhetoric for relief.²

THE STORK HAS COMPANY

The Democrats are not alone. Rather than stand up to the nonsense of ignoring the ecological consequences of growth, many NGOs set up to advocate for population stabilization miss this critical part of the story. We can no longer dismiss the fact that the US is growing nearly entirely by immigration.³ This unforgivable oversight carries with it disastrous consequences. Many NGOs continue to tell American families that family size is the number one environmental impact they can have. This is true. It is more significant than transportation and diet. But it is misleading to encourage Americans to have small families while ignoring the fact that the US will continue to grow unsustainably unless stricter laws are implemented and the regulations are humanely enforced.

A perusal of the Population Connection at <https://populationconnection.org/> indicates that their messaging centers around empowerment of women and access to contraception. Reproductive agency is not the dominant issue among most women who are not a part of a religious community in the US For

those with the freedom to decide their reproductive future, there are thousands of pharmacies all stocked with birth control options. Those who are having large families are often doing so by choice, unless the family pressure is severe. Those who are having small families are currently not able to see a societal benefit due to immigration inspired growth. It is astounding that even using the most powerful of ‘microscopes’ one will find it nearly impossible to locate anything about immigration’s contribution to US population growth on population websites dedicated to taming overpopulation. NPG is the notable exception!

On the other side of the aisle the current administration has weaponized the immigration issue inflaming the need to be concerned about mass immigration into an overpopulated US by stretching the law to the point of breaking and causing unnecessary suffering.⁴ When stories hit the news of deporting people with no due process under the Alien Enemies Act which was for wartime only and deporting them to countries with whom we are not at war, the whole issue of legally enforcing our laws goes out the window. Invoking this act disregards the real need to lawfully keep our numbers at the most sustainable level possible. Neither side is getting it right.

CHALLENGING PRO-NATALISM AND DE-POPULATION

The first thing one must understand is that too many people is a real thing and a huge problem. This runs counter to religious doctrine which promotes having many children as central to the continuation of their religion. Thousands of years ago, overpopulation was not a concern. Now it is, and their story must reflect a world bursting at 8.2 billion. It is critical that leaders of these religions wake up to the suffering that the continued promotion of large families is destined to cause.

Overpopulation will be solved by nature someday, but not in any way we want to endure. To be proactive is important, yet it cannot be solved by swapping out necessities. It cannot be solved with high rises, multi-unit buildings, or by temporarily containing urban sprawl. America’s overpopulation must be tamed by small families AND sensible immigration policies. This is a compassionate direction because it avoids suffering, misery and early death of humans and wildlife.

Americans need to understand that we are not threatened by depopulation (i.e., birth dearth), locally or globally. Yes, the fertility rates are lower, which is a good thing, but a decreasing growth rate is not the same as a decline in real numbers. The world grew by 70 million people last year. The US grew by millions too. How does that spell depopulation? In two words: it doesn’t. The depopulation hoopla is just a masquerade for promoting growth by those who are positioned to reap capitalistic benefits. It is a lot like an ad on social media. First the creators fabricate a problem, then they create a solution that won’t work, then they spend lots of money convincing you to order their fake cure. From wrinkle creams to “flushable” wipes, the world is full of those who make their living trying to convince consumers to buy things that aren’t true and won’t work. Growth in the US has accelerated climate change, creating a battleground for water between the increased demand of growing cities and the farmers who also need it to grow our crops. By any sensible measure, it is not a beneficial thing.

The disaster is embedded in the lie that environmentally-minded consumers have been told for decades upon decades. We can’t get ahead with just solar panels and cloth bags or even small families. Getting ahead includes considering both forms of growth, mass immigration and birth rate. This and only this will result in making room for wildlife for our increase in population has squeezed them into smaller and smaller parcels of land.

IN THE BEGINNING, WE HAD IT RIGHT

The environmental movement embraced population as an issue at the very beginning when Senator Gaylord Nelson recruited activist Dennis Hayes to start the protests of 1970 which became the first Earth Day. In Nelson’s 2002 autobiography, *Beyond Earth Day: Fulfilling the Dream*, Nelson clearly stated that the US birthrate was at replacement level, but that rising immigration would mean that in spite of a replacement level birthrate the US population would continue to grow. “...until we address this growing influx of immigrants, who account for about one third of our annual population growth, the population will continue to grow indefinitely despite the nation’s success at achieving

a replacement level birthrate.”

Nelson continues,

“Never has an issue with such major consequences for this country been so ignored. Never before has there been such a significant failure by the president, Congress, and the political infrastructure to address such an important problem. We are faced with the most important challenge of our time – the challenge of sustainability – and we refuse to confront it. It is the biggest default in our history. The reason for this silence is simple. In order to bring a halt to exponential growth, the number of legal immigrants entering this country would have to match the number of emigrants leaving it – about 220,000 people per year. Yet, while federal actions have increased the immigration rate dramatically during the last four decades, any suggestion that the rate be decreased to some previously acceptable level is met with charges of ‘nativism,’ ‘racism,’ and the like. Unfortunately, such opposition has silenced much-needed discussion of the issue – recalling the smear tactics of the late Senator Joseph McCarthy. The first time around it was ‘soft on communism.’ This time the charge is ‘racism,’ because a significant number of immigrants are of Hispanic descent. Demagogic rhetoric of this sort has succeeded in silencing the environmental and academic communities and has tainted any discussion of population and immigration issues as ‘politically incorrect.’ As frustrating as it is to see the president and members of Congress running for cover on such a monumental issue, it is nothing short of astonishing to see the great American free press, with its raft of syndicated columnists, frightened into silence by political correctness.”⁵

Nelson offered up this wisdom decades ago, but his warnings have largely been ignored. Since then, wildlife groups as well as anti-pollution groups have neglected to address our growing numbers. The immigration issue as the single most contributing factor to our growth was number one on the chopping block of consideration as it was considered a

quicksand issue and never addressed. Instead of making a solid argument that the US had limited supplies of arable soil, fresh water, and land for wildlife, they hid from the myopic accusations of racism for just mentioning the word, ‘immigration’. They have unilaterally chosen a path of political correctness instead of moving towards real sustainability. In 1970, Nelson was already worried that immigration numbers were too high and keeping us from stabilizing our population. Imagine his dismay if he were alive today to hear that an estimated 15-20 million illegal immigrants are now living in the US?

ORGANIZING THE SEATING CHARTS ON THE TITANIC

When it comes to immigration-fueled population growth, we are consumed with offering equal access to sitting in the dining room on the Titanic. Stephen Fry, English actor, writer, director and narrator, is outspoken about his desire to right the wrongs of how marginalized people are treated in society. He himself is both gay and Jewish. But, he is also a critic of political correctness, for he accuses this popular tract of thinking of placating critics of difficult issues while also halting any real progress. Fry has long spoken about his distaste for political correctness, often referred to as cancel culture. He said, “My only problem with political correctness really, apart from the fact that it’s po-faced, sanctimonious, self-righteous occasionally, is that it’s not effective.”⁶

I have personally experienced the way in which adherents to political correctness shut down meaningful conversations and violate the First Amendment’s guarantee of free speech. In 2021, I developed a PowerPoint talk called, “What if Wolves Could Talk.” In it, I looked at the political choices from both major political parties from the perspective of the wolf. The wolves, I claimed, had a vested interest in the US stopping population growth, for it fueled encroachment on their remaining habitat. I concluded that one party (Republican) was going after its delisting from the endangered species list and promoted its varmint status among western ranchers, while the other party (Democrats) was filling the country with more immigrants. I concluded that this gave the wolves no choice but to stay away from the proverbial voting booth.

I gave this talk with no push back to the Canadian Club of Rome (CACOR) and to a section of the Minnesota Bar Association. I was invited to give the very same talk to the International Wolf Conference in October of 2022 which was conveniently held just 30 minutes away from my home. The word got out that I was going to discuss immigration and its impact on growth. I got a phone call from one of the organizers. He asked if I could do my talk but remove any reference to immigration. I was told that someone on the board heard that I was going to mention immigration and he would have none of it. I asked if he wanted to preview my talk which was already online. I also asked if they wanted to put a disclaimer on the door. When I got a negative response to both offers, I withdrew from the conference and made a donation to several population groups in their honor.

This incident was disturbing on many levels. I am rather fond of free speech, and this was a canceling of free speech, guaranteed by the first amendment. It is the first of the 27 amendments because it is key to our democracy. "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances." The International Wolf Conference did nothing to save the wolves by canceling my talk. They displayed a complete lack of willingness to hear arguments from both sides. But they will never prevent me from highlighting the critical link between wolf extinction and our nation's continued obsession with immigration-driven population growth. And I will continue to tell the entire story as it is within my rights under the First Amendment.

REFLECTIONS ON FAMILY-SIZE CHOICES

To see if my views were shared by others of my generation, I asked a half dozen people to answer the following six questions. Five of the individuals responded. I am grateful to Craig B., Mike, Dick, Stefan, and Jane for sharing their experiences. I thought that they largely made their decision about their family size based on the efforts of ZPG and others. I knew that they had embraced the message that small families were better for our collective future. I asked them to

reflect on their family-size decision and what they thought would be the result of their choices versus what actually happened in our country.

I asked them the following questions:

1) Was the environment part of the reason for your decision to have zero, one or two children, as promoted first by ZPG when the US population was approximately 200 million?

2) Over the years, what personal benefits did it have?

3) What sacrifices, if any, did you make?

4) What expectations did you have about the US population today based on your family size choices?

5) Do you believe that the US currently has a desirable population size (342,300,000) considering our water resources, climate change, wildlife habitat, our road and housing infrastructure?

6) The US grew in population by approximately 140 million since the 1970s while the birthrate (total number of children per female) went down. Upon reflection, that US population growth today is mainly due to immigration, what do you think needs to be done differently regarding responsible population numbers here in the US?

One respondent, Craig B. from Minnesota, revealed that he thought the ZPG movement would have had a better impact on US population. He decided deliberately to have only one child and his daughter has decided not to reproduce. He did his part but is only reaping personal benefits. He continued:

"Having even one child is a major task, time-wise and financially. We were able to devote all of our resources and parenting skills to our one daughter. She graduated top of her high school class and in the top 7% of her college class. Teachers always commented on her great sense of empathy and kindness. Today, at 24, she is pretty much a model citizen. Had we had more than one child, we would have been much more stressed, and financially, we would not have been able to support two kids with more than the basics. I think we would have had a very full and rewarding life had we

not had any children, it just would have been different. We are very happy with our decision.”

Craig B. further revealed:

“When I was a teenager, overpopulation was talked about all the time. Having more than two children was looked down on. But my generation and those that followed eventually ignored this, and at the same time we allowed more and more immigrants into the country. So, the US population is much higher than I expected it to reach. I love immigrants, but if we are going to allow this many in, it means we need to reduce everyone’s birthrate to get back down to sustainable numbers.”

His perception of the current US population is refreshing, but sadly rare. It is not a message that is delivered by the media, or environmental groups. Craig B. continued:

“...we are way overpopulated, as is the world. As climate change worsens, people will be moving to ‘safer’ locations, putting stress on those areas. Natural areas are already overcrowded. Try getting camping permits during the peak of summer season, and you find that the wilderness is full of people trying to escape from people. Species extinctions are happening at an alarming pace. Natural habitats are being carved up. Crowded conditions make people behave badly towards each other. I would prefer to see a US population of around 100 million.”

Craig B.’s answer to the last question wouldn’t have been welcomed at very many wildlife conferences. When asked about US policy he answered candidly and even suggested an agreement to regulate the number of children that inbound immigrants could legally bear (something that NPG has not suggested and does not endorse.)

“Educate everyone about the many advantages of zero or one child families.” If it were up to Craig B., he would “Require that anyone entering the US as an immigrant agree to not have more than two children, and if they already have two or more, to not have any more. Regarding immigration, I think it

would be much better for everyone, if we worked to make other countries prosperous and safe, so folks did not feel the need to move in the first place. I love diversity that comes with immigration, but we do not have room to take in all the world’s needy people.”

Another respondent, Mike from Massachusetts, decided to have no kids due to the environment. Back in the 70s, family size was the issue, not immigration. He has enjoyed a life of activism, fun, and integrity with great financial independence. Mike said:

“I was hoping we would stabilize, and ultimately reduce our population to a size that is sustainable while still providing a reasonable level of consumption. That, for the USA, is surely under 150 million. Our current population is alarming. We are at least double the sustainable number. And we pave over a football field every thirty seconds to sustain growth - and plunder our home. We must start to think long term and get back to *Think globally, act locally*, set the example. This is all that works in the world today. This means setting the example for what is needed for honest sustainability and helping people where they are.”

Dick from California had similar answers. He was influenced by Paul Erlich’s appearances on Johnny Carson’s Tonight Show. The author of *The Population Bomb* had a profound effect on Dick as well as several trips to New York which revealed the “...gross unpleasantness of overcrowding, congestion, filth and barely seeing the sky amidst all the high-rise buildings.” Dick also hoped the US would have stabilized at a much lower number by now, but understands it hasn’t due to our immigration policy which he would like to be set at net zero, people leaving the country should equal those arriving, through legal channels.

Craig, Mike and Dick all felt that they hadn’t made any real sacrifice with their small family decisions.

The response from Stefan and Jane from Minnesota was different. They revealed that they had been involved directly in the ZPG movement having also been strongly influenced by Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb*. They shared the following:

“Stefan and I established a chapter of ZPG in Northwest Indiana in 1970, handed out literature in shopping malls, made presentations to local groups, etc.”

They committed to having two children, but when a birth control failure produced a third pregnancy, they made the difficult decision to terminate the pregnancy. Reflecting on the effects they had hoped this sacrifice would have made, they answered, “We hoped that through public education people would be motivated to limit family size voluntarily. We recognize that population size as well as per capita consumption are at the root of environmental problems. What we didn’t recognize at the time was the role that immigration would ultimately play in the continued growth of US population.”

THE NOT SO HOLY GRAIL OF ECONOMIC GROWTH

One cannot address the negative effects of overpopulation without looking into the pressures to grow which mainly originate from our economic system. The US is run on capitalism and the goal of prosperity as dictated by growth. We pay attention to the DOW industrial index and the S & P 500 as if they were the oracles with the power to point us in the direction of the good life. Growth is good, and rather essential according to this viewpoint for with it brings the delusional promise of a better world for all. Capitalism measures the very well-being of the country by the current condition of the GNP, Gross National Product, which had better be growing all the time. Growth requires more and more people. This is why the ultimate capitalist, Elon Musk, is unapologetic for having 14 children himself and for whipping up concern about so-called de-population. He sees any decrease in the numbers of people to be antithetical to his mission to keep his products growing in popularity. Increasing human numbers on our beleaguered planet is a ‘treadmill to nowhere’ says Nathaniel Gronewold.⁷ Once we understand that we are extremely overpopulated we will embrace a decline in birth and make other adjustments.

To question the wisdom of growing the economy is pure heresy to a traditional economist. To the ecologically-minded, however, the opposite is true. Growing the economy, means growing the population

and demonstrates how ecologically illiterate this narrative is on our limited planet. Don Mann, founder of Negative Population Growth, wrote about this in his Forum paper, *An Essay on a Sustainable Economy*.⁸ In it he states that the world needs a sustainable economy, but that it isn’t possible without a much smaller population.

To continue to push for growth as it strains our life support systems is a ticket to environmental collapse. Growth is always based on resources, all of which are finite. The move toward an electric economy in recent years has created an elevated demand for rare minerals. These include those required to power everything designed by Silicon Valley. From cell phones to electric cars, these minerals are abundant but not in concentrated easily extractable locations. Open-pit mining produces a devastating amount of pollution. Extracting the additional resources for a growth-based economy, exacerbated by population, contributes to greenhouse gases and climate disruption. Lithium, a light alkali metal, is in high demand due to its role in making rechargeable lithium-ion batteries used in smartphones, electric vehicles and laptops. Thacker Pass in Nevada is the site of a fight to prevent lithium mining due to the way it will scar the landscape and disturb these ancient sacred lands and the wildlife that lives there.⁹

Mining these metals eventually contributes more waste in this waste-based economy further polluting our waterways and filling up our landfills. The more people demanding these modern devices, the greater the pressure to unearth them.

Although antithetical to most people’s way of thinking, I believe the worst thing that we could develop is a problem-free source of energy. Imagine a truly clean form of energy, one that didn’t create waste, damage habitat or demand low-wage labor. There would be carte blanche to continue growth-inspired development. Conservation practices would fall by the wayside and growth would proceed at even a faster pace.

There is the additional problem that when someone moves from a lower energy demanding country and into a higher energy/ecological footprint country, the per capita greenhouse gases increase. Attached to each increase is a plethora of problems including more intense storms, longer fire seasons and extreme heat which are costly in both lives and property. We are

already suffering from them.¹⁰

Exploring new ways of treating our economy so it offers real prosperity and not just money for the money makers began years ago. “Prosperity without growth” was offered by Tim Jackson in an article over fifteen years ago by Jeremy Leggett.¹¹

The late Herman E. Daly is considered one of the founders of the degrowth movement and describes his philosophy in his book *Beyond Growth*. He founded the Center for the Advancement of a Steady State Economy (CASSE) which works to create a steady state economic model which tries to find ways to keep people satisfied without destroying the world around us.¹²

It cannot be repeated enough. It is essential that we move this issue upstream. We need to insist that the media and our politicians focus on true sustainability. It is completely unproductive to allow it to be mired in the muck of hysteria and xenophobia. The messaging on all environmental and quality-of-life issues, from saving wildlife to preventing water scarcity and climate change, must include small families and sensible immigration policy focused on sustainability. This is where we have the power. The power to effect global growth is limited and must rely on donations and suggestions. Here in the US, we can offer real ecologically sensitive policies with humanely enforceable laws to our people within the boundaries of our country. Otherwise, we will continue to be

overwhelmed with the fallout of swelling numbers, when so many thought they were on the right track.

NOTES:

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NOTE: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of NPG, Inc.



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