

ECO-DECENCY AND THE NEED TO START ASKING THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

**An NPG Forum Paper
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ABSTRACT

What our national conversation and the environmental movement in particular has been lacking for a long time is the need to somehow merge the ethics of decency with the existential threats we have created by exceeding the boundaries of our planet's ecological parameters. These are usually two separate conversations, and they need to be considered together. One is about how to advance the well-being of people and the other is how to conserve natural resources and keep the planet from being destroyed under the weight of our abuse. These goals are often at odds with each other, since we are at the top of the food/water/energy pyramid and demand too much of the planet with our numbers alone. We have been asking the wrong questions when addressing our problems. We need to ask if our actions are sustainable AND if they are humane.

THE CORE PRINCIPLE OF ENVIRONMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS

The “Eco” of Eco-decency refers to ecology, a branch of biology that looks at the relationships between organisms and their environment – particularly the issue of what happens when demand exceeds the ability of a physical environment to provide sustenance. The absence of a balance between said organisms and their physical environment is “overshoot.”

We are swimming in overshoot, the evidence of which is everywhere we look. We just haven't been addressing it properly. When we ask the right questions, we will point the public to the organic nature of our problems. We need journalists and commentators to work more diligently to bring the term ‘ecological overshoot’

into our nomenclature. How amazing it would be if we heard on the news every night the critical question: “Is ecological overshoot responsible for the extinction rates of native flora and fauna, soil degradation, climate change, deforestation, aquifer depletion, and the accumulation of non-biodegradable waste in our landfills and oceans?” That would certainly set the stage for helping people to connect the dots on their own. Unfortunately, it does not fit into our overall growth narrative so sponsors would be in an uproar.

It shouldn't be hard to conclude from there, with the many examples in our collective experience, that the answers are all a definitive YES. All are symptoms of overshooting our planet's ability to renew and replenish life-giving resources. The Global Footprint Network can provide the evidence. Its website has volumes of

data to demonstrate the current conditions of our planet. See <https://www.footprintnetwork.org> for more information.

When we ask the other critical question: “Are we really helping humanity in the long run by using finite resources to benefit a constantly growing number of people?” the well-examined answer will be NO. We must be honest in our reporting on all topics and admit that we can no longer keep the issues of ecological demise and human welfare separate. They are deeply connected and the time to acknowledge this connection is overdue. We must insist that we quit reporting on stories with a lens of near-sighted human orientation, so powerful that we do not see the harm we are doing to our life support systems.

On the other hand, we cannot be indifferent to the immediacy of human suffering. The difficulty in taking on the merging of these two narratives will make climbing Mt. Everest in bare feet and backwards seem easy. It means changing our age-old narrative in order to focus less on people today and even work to reduce the human footprint so that we may ultimately lighten the burden on our ecosystems and ensure a decent future.

Our society needs to be shown the truth, that if we develop every scrap of land to accommodate more and more growth, we are not being helpful or ecologically focused. We must ask the difficult question: “Are the actions we take today humane in the context of tomorrow?” We must act with concern for the land which will no longer be in agricultural production, no longer able to provide habitat for wildlife, with limited ability to provide a sustainable water supply in the future. When we make decisions today without considering their ecological ramifications tomorrow, we are setting the stage to cause much more harm.

THE ENVIRONMENT AS AN ABSTRACTION

We need to acknowledge that ecology rules our world. Modern lifestyles and the rapid advancement of technology add to the burden of

what the earth must provide. Smartphones have modernized many rural countries with access to information. They have made lives safer with their 911 features as well. But with each new invention we must mine more rare earth elements (REEs) creating more pollution and loss of habitat. It takes 75 elements to make each cell phone. These are mostly found in China where regulations are lax.¹ There were 1.844 billion cell phones sold in 2024 which is equivalent to 22.2% of the global population (8.2 billion) buying a mobile phone that year.² The REEs are limited and our appetite for the latest cell phone keeps increasing.

The main concern behind the higher demand for rare earth elements is the need to dig huge open pits and blast into the rock for extraction. This causes a variety of harmful outcomes, including: “local pollution with chemicals, radionuclides, and heavy metals, but also the destruction of vulnerable ecosystems and cultural and historical heritage, as well as habitats for local residents and indigenous peoples.”³ Human health is also at risk. We cannot damage the earth without creating human suffering as well. Exposure to REEs can damage lungs, and create neurological problems among others not only for miners but for those in surrounding communities as these chemicals become airborne.⁴

Left out of the conversation of how fast and unsustainably we are consuming resources is how many people are doing the consuming. Long ago, Homo sapiens triumphed over all other human-like species, Neanderthal included, and now occupy every continent with over 8.2 billion people while growing by 71 million per year. That demand alone for life’s basics is unsustainable.

We can push the limits of our natural resources but only to our own detriment. Water cycles were established long before humans appeared on earth, and they cannot be altered without damaging both the availability and quality of this life-giving substance. Soil took hundreds of years to establish and all of life depends upon it. It takes 3,000 years to make soil

fertile, and we are, as the bumper sticker goes, “treating our soil like dirt.” We may be able to create a new smartphone every year, but we cannot make more soil. This is problematic when we are losing our precious soil due to development and climate change. Dr Maria C. Hernandez-Soriano previously worked on carbon sequestration, seeking to understand how carbon is stored in the soil and how to keep it there. She wisely says: “Humans – despite their artistic pretensions, their sophistication, and their many accomplishments – owe their existence to a six-inch layer of topsoil, and the fact that it rains.”⁵

Because soil and water are critical to life on earth, protecting them is humane by definition. Therefore, it is essentially a silly argument to put people and the environment at odds with each other. The trouble is that most people in the US buy their consumable goods in a store, making it harder for them to see or feel the consequences of bad ecological policies.

The environment has become an abstraction. We spend most of our lives in an indoor environment. We don’t see the pollution making its way down our storm drains into the nearest stream which finds its way to our oceans. We are too distracted by our devices to notice that insects no longer smash into our windshields by the hundreds anymore. We are paying too much attention to commercial nonsense and not enough attention to our rapidly deteriorating natural environments.

‘The’ environment, first of all, needs to be referred to as ‘OUR’ environment. Our society needs to stop thinking of it as outside of ourselves. We need to stop chopping it up into little pieces and covering each issue one at a time. Our educational systems must take on this responsibility, or we will continue to have a hard time making connections from the space of our indoor worlds and those connections need to be made for us beginning in grade school. We need to teach students how to embrace Eco-decency as a core concept.

THE MACRO AND MICRO WORLDS AT A CROSSROADS

We know in general that to harm bees and other pollinators which bring us so many of our fruits and vegetables will harm access to our food supply. That is the macro, big picture, and pretty easy to teach in our schools and within our environmental circles. In the micro picture, however, we don’t want pests anywhere near us. Creepy crawlies are well, creepy. Many can sting and spread diseases, so we choose our lawns and manicured living spaces for aesthetic comfort and to keep up our real estate values. Then there is the profit motive. People make a living keeping insects at bay. There are the companies who profit from selling pesticides. There are companies who profit from servicing homes and businesses to rid them of pests – and they all employ lots of people. But scientist and author Rachel Carson was right. She warned us decades ago that we were paying a huge price for this preference. Her book *Silent Spring* came out in 1962 with a warning about favoring pesticides over ‘pests’. Killing off nature was not going to end well for people, she predicted. The birds were just the first to be silenced. By giving permission to the production and use of harmful chemicals we started a war on people too. In spite of trillions of dollars to fight cancer we are still struggling to come near any real cures while still producing and promoting carcinogens.

Modern society is not good at planning for the future. We are like toddlers wanting what feels good now and postponing the consequences of our myopic choices until they are at our doorstep. Overpopulation is a problem we prefer to shove under the rug because of the indecencies of dealing with it and now we have more suffering than ever with over 2 billion people facing water and food scarcity around the world. A sobering 700 million are live in abject poverty.

On the global scale we have not acknowledged that nature has two cruel ways of dealing with overpopulation. Disease and starvation are its henchmen. When we interfere

with those two things, for altruistic reasons, we inadvertently kick the overpopulation can down the road. When we feed a poor woman and her four children, it would benefit everyone involved to also help her find workable birth control options to ensure she does not have yet another hungry child to feed next year. We must take the difficult step of working on these two important issues together so as not to help to increase even more famine in the future.

In 2015, I called for people to *Move Upstream* in my book with that title and subtitle of ‘A Call to Solve Overpopulation.’ (Freethought House Press) I wanted people to understand the inhumanity of exhausting our resources through the problem of reproductive success. Seeing the big picture, I believed would help us make the right calculations. Unfortunately, it is too difficult for most to move upstream when they see suffering happening in front of their eyes, so they remain downstream tethered to the moment they are witnessing rather than to its causes.

When I was employed as a naturalist in my early years, a man came in with an English sparrow nestling which had fallen from its nest. I tried to explain to him that it was invasive and if we rescued it, then it would be allowed to attack native birds. His response was simply, “all I see is a bird in need of some help.” And there you have it. As challenging as it is, big picture thinking is what we must adopt if we are interested in having a better world for the next generation.

MOVING IMMIGRATION UPSTREAM

Immigration policy and its enforcement is a great example of how difficult it is to move upstream. In order to see the negative impacts of allowing in so many needy strangers to our land at this point in our history, one must have a deep understanding of the inhumanity of overshoot. As a nation built on immigrants, the effort to curb immigration numbers seems unfair at best and hypocritical at worst. But just because there is a conflict between the macro and micro picture

doesn’t make unsustainability any less impactful.

The US solidified its boundaries with the addition of the state of Hawaii in 1959. That was 66 years ago, and the US hasn’t added to its geographic size of 2.6 billion acres since then and is unlikely to do so. Meanwhile our population keeps rising, mostly due to both legal and illegal immigration. Geographic size is only one measure of what people need. Much of the US is uninhabitable, it is either tied up in agricultural land or mountain ranges and desert. Most jobs are now in cities and all of them are overpopulated relative to their water supplies, housing supplies and infrastructure. Growing our population makes no sense in the big picture. We are now pushing 343,000,000 people in the US who all require housing, jobs, energy, water and food. How many is too many? When will we be full? Can we even culturally prepare ourselves for the concept that there are too many people in the US? Yes, the world is overpopulated and that puts a lot of pressure on us to provide for those in need, but we do not have the capacity to offer help to the billions who are suffering. We also do not have a universal governing body with the power to stabilize and reduce population globally. The closest we have ever come is the UNFPA (the United Nations Family Planning Agency) and even when their mission was more about overpopulation, their reach wasn’t enough. So, it is up to each country to deal with its own overshoot.

Yet, as important as living within our ecological boundaries is, we must be able to introduce decency into the application of any policy which addresses the hard facts that more people added to overcrowded spaces exacerbates every problem known to humankind. Overshoot makes public services hard to negotiate, it makes wildlife hard to protect, it makes all of our systems clogged with the burden of numbers.

We all know someone or some families who came here under difficult circumstances seeking a better life and who are integrated into society providing many important functions in the jobs they do and the people they serve. When you

know a nice hard-working person who is here without documentation, it's difficult to see the harm of overlooking legal issues. When you are witness to the individual pain of being forced to leave the country you have come to know, it's hard to move upstream and see why it matters that immigration policies be followed. We are hard-wired to help those in need now in our communities. But ignoring sensible immigration policies is not helpful for it will make our numbers even more unsustainable. Capping our legal immigration numbers to 200,000, as suggested by NPG, would keep our country on more of a sustainable track. Those who argue for treating people with decency are not out of line, however. They are protecting our moral integrity. The moral high ground must be delicately balanced with a sustainable demand for resources.

TIME FOR DECENCY

We must keep our numbers in line with sustainability. That is why upholding immigration laws is important. But they cannot be used as an excuse to treat others beyond the reach of the law. If we are all innocent until proven guilty then rounding up unarmed people military style and refusing to allow them representation is a slap in the face of our constitution and its intention for a fair republic. It is the opposite of due process per the 5th and 14th amendments. The news will always focus its cameras on the injustice of these round-ups, setting back any meaningful conversation about needing to curb immigration for the goal of sustainable numbers for the foreseeable future.

GETTING ON BOARD WITH ECO-DECENCY

Eco-decency is a philosophy which tries to knit together the need for humane treatment of people while respecting nature's rules. To do that we must start asking the right questions. There is much blame to go around. First is our unsustainable growth-based system as reflected in greedy corporate interests too easily willing to sacrifice the environment for profit. There is also

a general unwillingness to look in the mirror and see that our species has taken over the planet with our billions. In spite of the harm humans are doing to the only planet we've got, we still must restrain ourselves from treating any human being with disrespect.

We must familiarize ourselves with the principles of sustainability, both numbers and consumption, starting in our high schools and use that as our lens for policy decisions. Journalists skirt the issue, politicians won't address it, and even academics play it safe within their silos of knowledge. We must be the adults in the room or risk leaving the general public unable to see how we fit as a species into life's biggest picture.

It is often easier to see the inhumane side of overpopulation when we look at other countries, especially those further along the road of living under the burden of high numbers. Poverty and overpopulation are deeply connected. Just two years ago, India surpassed China in being the most populated country in the world with a completely unsustainable number of people, a total of 1,454,606,724.

For comparison that is more people than we had on the entire planet in 1804, the year we reached our first billion.⁶

While it is true that there is huge income inequality in India with the upper 1% controlling 58% of the wealth that is not the only source of their poverty. Numbers matter and must be addressed. It lives beyond the very real issues of racism. It lives beyond access to birth control. It is all about a deeper understanding that when we overwhelm our resources we suffer. Preventing a future without resources should be our collective goal in all countries whether they are growing by internal high birth rates or by immigration.

THE QUESTIONS WE MUST ASK

We must ask a very different set of questions from what we are hearing even from what remains of public media. These include:

- What is the relationship of large human populations to poverty and the suffering that accompanies the lack of adequate resources?
- What is the ideal population size for the United States?
- How can we humanely stabilize and then reduce our numbers to prevent more suffering?
- What different kind of economic system would help us to slow our growth?
- How are human numbers and climate change connected?
- How can we better help those needing refuge while not increasing our already overpopulated country?

THE FAILURE OF JOURNALISTS

There are some amazingly bright and thoughtful commentators in the world today, but we never hear these questions from them. They live and work downstream, often seeming perplexed by why our problems keep getting worse as our numbers rise. Some have even explored the idea, promoted by growthists, that perhaps we need to encourage more births. But honest reporting on how our numbers contribute to everything from loss of wildlife to increases in carbon in our atmosphere is hard to find even from so-called environmental reporters.

Most of our best reporters and anchors are now multi-millionaires themselves whose checks are written by multinational corporations. We are finding out what happens when the corporate line isn't followed with the canceling of *The Late Show* and the sudden interruption of programming on *Jimmy Kimmel Live*. Imagine if they were to do what Johnny Carson did on *The Tonight Show* years ago, and invite population writer Paul Ehrlich to appear on 19 different occasions. So there just might be some muzzling involved in not fully covering our problems. Sustainability is not a goal of the corporate mindset, their god is growth.

One of the highest rated reporters is Christiane Amanpour. I have been a personal fan of her reporting for years. But looking at the 35 topics she and her co-host have covered so far in 2025 on her podcast, *Christiane Amanpour Presents*, none have addressed sustainability and human numbers. They are all interesting and important topics often about war and economics, but nowhere can one find a story addressing overpopulation.⁷

Chris Mooney of the *Washington Post* is rated as one of our top environmental journalists. He covers energy, climate change and the environment but manages never to cover the number of people needing energy, or contributing to climate change. When our top environmental journalists refuse to shine a light on the role of overpopulation in all of our other environmental and social justice issues, it makes it very difficult for activists to move the needle on this issue. How will we ever address the rampant rise in income inequality and other topical issues without putting them in the context of overpopulation and overshoot?

With our coral reefs dying due to global climate change, we must ask what impact does overpopulation have on this issue? We may have some reporters ask why we haven't worked harder at protecting them when half a billion people depend on them for their food and livelihood, but they don't go any deeper than that. We must repeat over and over again to get the perspective that there is no equality on a dead planet. There are no Republicans, no Democrats, no Libertarians or Anarchists who will survive on a planet which can no longer support life.

Fortunately, there are NGO's dedicated to this issue, they just aren't very well funded or mainstream nor do they frequently get interviewed by mainstream media. The full list put together by the Overpopulation Project is here at <https://overpopulation-project.com/organizations-dealing-with-overpopulation>.

Mainstream media must be unafraid to interview those professionals who work on this

issue. How we respect our borders while respecting people is the difficult conversation we must stop avoiding.

LET THE RIVER RUN THROUGH IT: EXAMPLES OF ECO-DECENCY

There are real life examples of how we have listened to nature's rules and created a better world in the process by using the brush stroke of eco-decency.

For years, the dams on the Klamath River were harming the way of life of the native people who called it home. The salmon could not run, the river was full of silt. Decades of activism finally paid off; four dams were destroyed and the river was restored.

The key was getting all of the stakeholders in the Klamath River Valley to have a voice. The hydroelectric dams worked to make sure the rivers never made it to the ocean. Meanwhile, it was a huge disruption to the livelihoods and spiritual traditions of the Yurok, Karuk, Hoopa and Klamath people, who together with conservationists fought hard to get the dams destroyed. In this success the right questions were asked. What is the dam doing for the people and for the wildlife? Does the dam have any long-term benefit? What has to be done to fully restore the area so that flooding would be controlled and both people and nature can benefit? Those questions led to the huge restoration effort which included planting 17 billion carefully selected native seeds, the restoration of its banks, and the stabilization of sediment.⁸

It's a great example of reversing an old and bad idea which never fully considered the ecology of the area or the people who have a deep connection to it.

The restoration of Yellowstone National Park began with the right questions. What role do wolves play in the balance of nature? How does controlling the elk help restore the streams and native plants? How can reintroducing wolves, which were removed in the 1800s due to bad

wildlife management plans, help to create a trophic cascade, or a trickle-down benefit to all of the trophic levels helping everything from grasses to insects? Yellowstone is now a more biodiverse place because the right questions were asked and the right solutions were acted upon.

Examples of eco-decency exist in the agricultural world as well. To grow food in ways that nourishes the land is now more difficult than ever. Big-Ag follows the edicts of overpopulation. When demand is so high, it is necessary to get more and more crop and animal production out of every farm. To make things more productive and efficient more chemicals are used and more animals are drugged. It is not eco-friendly to say the least. It adds to our nitrogen loads and contaminates our water cycle among other detriments. It's also not decent. Big Ag is notorious for needing temporary labor and creating low-paying jobs with grueling work conditions. Enter the movement of restorative agriculture and the funding of small organic farmers who want to make their living working with the land instead of against it to feed their families and neighbors. Farm AID is a musical experience benefit fundraiser which just celebrated its 40th year. Famous musicians with connections to farming like Willy Nelson, John Mellencamp and Neil Young donate their time and talent to help finance this grassroots effort to restore the land and push back large corporate farms growing only single crops in our rural areas. They asked the right questions. How can we restore our soils, grow healthier food, and make a living doing it while not exploiting labor?

There are many other smaller examples of local efforts walking the walk of eco-decency. Truly non-profit thrift stores save landfill space by recycling used items, employ disabled workers, and save money for those needing to stretch their dollars. They asked the right questions. How can we reduce waste and employ the hard to employ while saving consumers money?

Local farmers' markets are another example

of eco-decency at work. If a city asks the right questions, it will come up with the facilitation of farmers' markets. Those with the foresight to begin them have asked themselves: "What could help create a healthier and less expensive food stream and create community while reducing waste?" The positive fallout of these heartfelt and honest questions has resulted in many who understand the value in supporting small local farmers.

CONCLUSION

Eco-decency is much easier on a smaller scale. But it is a beginning. We must tell people the truth that though there is no easy pathway forward, it is the only one. No one wants to live in a fearful, punishing, unfair, indecent world and no one can live on a planet which seems destined to become absent of its life-supporting cycles. We must stop running away from the ecological reality that overpopulation will destroy our planet. We must also commit to rational and humane ways to reduce total population numbers for both the country and the planet. There is a phrase that we must learn how to walk and chew gum at the same time. This is arguably much more like walking across hot coals barefoot with a tornado chasing us, but what other choice do we have?

DEDICATION

This paper is warmly dedicated to the late Dr. Jane Goodall who passed away on October 1, 2025. Dr. Goodall opened the world's eyes to the fascinating chimpanzees of Africa, teaching all of us that we are more alike than we realize. For more than sixty years, her life was devoted to better understanding – and protecting – one of nature's most alluring species, and our world is certainly a better place thanks to her tireless efforts. Dr. Goodall most definitely possessed an enormous amount of Eco-decency.

NOTES:

1. <https://classx.org/why-it-takes-75-elements-to-make-your-cell-phone/#:~:text=These%20elements%2C%20like%20yttrium%2C%20terbium,environmental%20regulations%20are%20often%20lax>
2. <https://www.sellcell.com/how-many-mobile-phones-are-sold-each-year/>
3. <https://fpif.org/rare-earth-mining-sacrificing-the-environment-to-save-the-planet/>
4. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11125915/#sec3-toxics-12-00317>
5. <https://www.jic.ac.uk/advances/soil-the-foundation-of-life-on-earth/>
6. <https://populationconnection.org/learn/population-milestones/>
7. <https://open.spotify.com/show/3ZpgFegm3q3AGjiFbjLV59>
8. <https://planetforward.org/story/klamath-river-restoration/>



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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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