

Epilogue: Is Humanity a Cancer on the Earth?

Forty years ago, at the dawn of the modern environmental movement, it was common to hear humanity's rapid population growth spoken of as "cancerous"—dangerous and out of control—and even occasionally of humanity itself as a cancer threatening life on Earth. Since then, such rhetoric has largely disappeared from environmental discourse, along with serious attention to human overpopulation.

The notion of "humanity as cancer" grated. Who wants to think of themselves, or their children, as part of a sickening, life-threatening disease? Many of us know people who have suffered from cancer. The whole way of speaking seems in bad taste.

Yet environmentalists back then at least had the clarity to realize that overpopulation was a problem, and the courage to say so. Today we are ever so much more sensitive, well-behaved, well-spoken. And we are failing utterly to protect wild nature or future human generations from overpopulation.

In one area after another, the contributors to [Life on the Brink](#) document what Dave Foreman so aptly describes as "the Manswarm" overwhelming biodiversity. They lament the losses and call for strong action to end them: for human restraint in our appropriation of the habitats and resources of the world. And they know that such restraint is impossible without curbing human numbers.

The ability to restrain ourselves lies at the core of humanity's ostensible superiority over the rest of nature. Immanuel Kant laid it out clearly over 200 years ago: rationality = choice = freedom = morality. Our ability to reason allows us to distinguish different courses of action and choose one over another. This constitutes a limited, yet real, freedom, which in turn demands that we act with justice and generosity in a world that we have so much power to influence, for good or ill.

We do not expect wombats, redwoods, or cancer-causing viruses to respect rights or appreciate limits. We do expect this from people. The claim is that humanity is different precisely because we can act with foresight, planning, restraint, and higher ends in view. But can we? Can people act intelligently and with restraint as a species, a global community, which collectively holds the fate of Earth in its hands? That is far from clear.

Humanity gives every indication of being "out of control" in terms of its use and appropriation of the biosphere (Hern 1990, 1999). It is clear that rapid economic and demographic growth is the primary, fundamental cause of our major environmental problems. The IPCC's 4th Assessment Report of 2007 shows this unequivocally for global climate change; several overviews in recent years document it for the ongoing worldwide mass extinction of species (Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity 2010); and the comprehensive Millennium Ecosystem Assessment published in 2005 documents it for ecological degradation as a whole. Growth in human numbers and economic activity is causing these problems. Yet it is precisely growth which cannot be stopped or even slowed under the current economic regime, or questioned by the reigning economic ideology.

Economists—the secular priests of the current age—have developed an elaborate theology in which perpetual growth is necessary, good, and inevitable, and those who acknowledge limits to growth are deemed pessimists who oppose human progress. They justify the rejection of limits by appeal to a view of human nature as greedy and insatiable, and to a definition of freedom that (unlike Kant’s) limits the use of reason to the instrumental pursuit of arbitrary ends, rather than seeing the recognition and pursuit of higher ends as key to real freedom. They have developed a metaphysics in which everything which is “not us” has value exclusively as a resource for us.

Modern economic theory reads as if cancer had found a voice. Why, here it is now, in the person of Larry Summers! In the late 1990s, as U.S. Treasury Secretary, Summers declared that the Clinton administration “cannot and will not accept any ‘speed limit’ on American economic growth. It is the task of economic policy to grow the economy as rapidly, sustainably and inclusively as possible.” Earlier, he had confidently stated that “there are no . . . limits to the carrying capacity of the Earth that are likely to bind any time in the foreseeable future. There isn’t a risk of an apocalypse due to global warming, or anything else. The idea that we should put limits on growth because of some natural limit is a profound error” (McKibben 2007, 9, 24). Profiles of Summers habitually refer to him as highly intelligent. So, reading the words above, you might assume that he had actually explored whether rapid growth really is sustainable and found good evidence that the answer is “yes,” or that his “foreseeable future” stretched out past the next quarterly earnings reports or election cycle, say fifty or a hundred years out, when our children and grandchildren will be alive. But such is not the case. Summers literally does not know what he is talking about, and words like ‘sustainably’ or ‘the foreseeable future’ are

merely there for their soothing rhetorical effect. They are an invitation to not think about limits to growth, and a subtle preparation to accept lost species and ecological degradation as inevitable.

The contributors to this anthology decline the invitation. We are committed to the idea that the human race can be more than an ever-gaping mouth swallowing the world. We want to work toward a future in which humanity limits its appropriation of the biosphere, and wild nature continues to flourish. In this way, I believe, we stand up for what is best in humanity.

In the world our contributors seek to create, polar bears continue to hunt seals along the Arctic pack ice. Sperm whales fight unseen duels-to-the-death with giant squids, a mile below the ocean's surface. Arctic terns knit together the North and South poles in their twice-yearly migrations, covering 44,000 miles annually. The great forests of the Amazon, Borneo, and the Congo remain standing, remain breathing, remain overflowing with life, and are not cut down to accommodate displaced peasants, or to grow sugarcane to fuel an ever-growing world auto fleet. In that world, many of the biosphere's grasslands are restored as wild ecosystems brimming with wildlife. Rivers are allowed to run free of dams, overexploitation and pollution, so they can become again—in the language of the Song of Solomon—"living waters." Sea turtles and sharks are brought back from the precipice of extinction. Large land animals, from wolves and cougars to tigers and elephants, are also restored and granted the unbroken expanses of untrammelled nature they require to live and evolve. In the world we envision, we stop cutting old-growth, period; indeed, we leave many of the world's forests alone, because our need for pulp, wood, land and fuel is so vastly reduced.

In the world we seek to create, our children's and our grandchildren's right to enjoy natural beauty remains secure, rather than being sacrificed on the altars of greed, materialism, or desperate need. They can explore and enjoy wild nature, in parks and open spaces close to home, or backpacking and canoeing across great wilderness areas. Their pictures and memories need not become memorials to what has been lost, as so many of our own have become. Instead, they may share the experiences and the places they have loved with their own children and grandchildren, and so on, in perpetuity.

Since most of the contributors to Life on the Brink are Americans, many of us have a special concern to preserve wild places in the United States, and we do not apologize for that concern. That is how environmentalism works, when it works, with people standing up and fighting for those places that are near and dear to them. But we do not seek to preserve our own beloved landscapes by displacing the ecological costs of Americans' excessive consumption elsewhere. Instead, we strive to reduce such consumption ourselves and try to convince our fellow citizens to do likewise. At the same time, we decline to support the folly of nations that have high fertility rates, by encouraging them to send their excess inhabitants to the United States. The American frontier closed long ago; we are "full up." The ecological damage to the North American continent has already been exorbitant, and it is time to conserve the wild nature and nonhuman species that remain, many of which are in decline. Meanwhile, from a global ecological perspective, the last thing the world needs is hundreds of millions more Americans.

This volume's contributors recognize that no country can preserve wild nature in the context of endless economic or demographic growth, nor can the world as a whole. Either of these tsunamis, by itself, will wash away the wild species and wild places we love, and threaten essential ecosystem services. Hence we are committed to ending the endless growth economy; and support the family planning, abortion, women's empowerment, tax, and immigration policies necessary to stabilize and then reduce populations around the world and in the United States. Anything less is neither ecologically sustainable, nor fair to the rest of nature. For these reasons, we reject suggestions from the left to focus on reforming the economy while ignoring population growth, and suggestions from the right to limit population growth, through reduced immigration, while maximizing per capita economic growth. Such recommendations betray a weak commitment to sustainability and a shallow understanding of what is necessary to achieve it.

We thus are committed to an end to conventional economic and demographic growth. But we do not seek the creation of some static, unchanging reality. Humanity can and should continue to grow in all sorts of ways: morally, intellectually, spiritually, creatively. It would be great if we grew in our understanding and appreciation for nature, and in our willingness to share the world with other species. But cramming ever more people onto the landscape is not compatible with this sort of moral and intellectual growth. Such growth has clearly become toxic to the ecosystems that human beings, for all our technological achievements, remain dependent on for our survival and flourishing. It is time to consciously work to decrease humanity's physical presence on Earth.

Human beings have a legitimate place on our home planet, of course, in rural and urban landscapes, and even in wild landscapes, in small numbers. But our place is not everywhere. As Rod Nash, Win Staples and other contributors suggest, we need to redress a growing imbalance between human-dominated and natural landscapes. The human footprint needs to shrink. And again, lessening the human footprint is inseparable from limiting the number of human feet.

Whether our contributors' visions will be achieved, for a future that includes the flourishing of biodiversity, remains to be seen. Perhaps humanity really is a cancer on the biosphere, unwilling or unable to control ourselves. We will likely prove or disprove the hypothesis this century; above all, perhaps, by whether or not we can consciously and conscientiously limit our own numbers.

Bibliography

Hern, Warren. "Why Are There So Many of Us? Description and Diagnosis of a Planetary Ecopathological Process." Population and Environment 12 (1990): 9-39.

Hern, Warren. "How Many Times Has the Human Population Doubled? Comparisons with Cancer." Population and Environment 21 (1999): 59-80.

McKibben, Bill. Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future. New York: Henry Holt, 2007.

Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity. Global Biodiversity Outlook 3. Montreal, Canada, 2010.