

Dave Foreman's Around the Campfire "Birth Dearth Folly and the 300 Millionth American"

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I was something of a smart aleck—even a rascal—as a kid. My grandma would tease me that if I weren't careful, I might end up with just a bundle of switches for a birthday present. Believe me, I knew what switches were and what they were for. Grandma was gentler with me than she had been with her own brood, but when I was a "little devil," I was ordered to go find a switch and cut it. If it was a wimpy switch, I had to find a stouter one and then catch a sterner thrashing.

I had my sixtieth birthday this October. It seems that for a landmark birthday like the sixtieth, I should have gotten a nice present. Alas, I got switches. Two days after my birthday, Nancy and I were sound asleep in bed with our three fierce attack cats. A cat burglar broke in, quietly made his way downstairs to The Rewilding Institute office, and swiftly gathered up my MacBook, wallet, cool watch with altimeter and barometer, and dive watch. He slipped away into the night. When I discovered the dirty deed in the morning, I cancelled my credit cards and ATM card, called the police and my insurance agent. Then I gave my cats a stern talking-to. Within days I was setting up a new computer. Then I realized that the backup DVD had been in the drive of the stolen computer. I lost several months of work, a bunch of new material for the Rewilding website (including the first parts of a population and biodiversity page), our fall fund-raising letter, and the draft for this campfire. I also lost all of my email messages (about 200 I hadn't gotten to and never will now) and my address book.

Well, this was a real black and blue bummer. I doubt I will ever get caught up.

But the theft wasn't the real bundle of switches for my sixtieth birthday present. No, it was small potatoes to the switches I got the day before my birthday.

Recall the glittering, fireworks day of October 17. This was the day that those who have the job of estimating such things picked as the symbolic day for the United States of America to stand proud as a nation of THREE HUNDRED MILLION LIVING PEOPLE. There were celebrations hither and yon. Positive spins were tossed out like beads at Mardi Gras. The day was ballyhooed as symbolizing the death of Malthus and proof that Julian Simon had won the bet with Paul Ehrlich. There were rumors that Julian Simon's waxy corpse was teased out of his glass sarcophagus to dance with giddy young ladies and plump, pink-faced young men at the Club for Growth. Even a spokesperson for the Environmental Defense Fund explained that population growth wasn't a problem, that the problem was just where people chose to live.¹

Wait.

Did you get that?

Let me repeat.

¹ "U.S. Population on Track to 300 Million," *The New York Times*, October 14, 2006.

Even a spokesperson for the Environmental Defense Fund explained that population growth wasn't a problem, that the problem was just where people chose to live.

Terrible and foreboding as our country's population explosion to 300 million is, more terrible and foreboding is how Americans across our beautiful land are reacting.

For almost forty years, I've supported slowing and then halting human population growth. It hasn't been my main issue, but I have always woven it in—especially in my *Earth First! Journal* and *Wild Earth* writings. During these four decades I have seen the world's thinkers and leaders degenerate from taking population growth seriously and trying to find practical ways to slow the explosion to flippant brush-offs: "Oh, don't you know? Ehrlich was wrong. Everyone knows that. Population isn't a problem anymore. Julian Simon proved that."

And they say this in growing numbers, even within the environmental movement; they say this while standing in the knife-edged, roaring winds of climate change, mass species extinctions, gut-wrenching poverty and hunger around the world, resource-shortage-driven wars of unspeakable brutality and inhumanity....

"Wind? What wind? I don't feel any wind."

This species-wide mental breakdown finds its gurgling, foolish voice in those who now warn of ...The Birth Dearth.

Phillip Longman writes in *Foreign Affairs*, "Most people think overpopulation is one of the worst dangers facing the globe. In fact, the opposite is true. As countries get richer, their populations age and their birthrates plummet. And this is not just a problem of rich countries; the developing world is also getting older fast. Falling birthrates might seem beneficial, but the *economic* and *social* price is too steep to pay. The right policies could help turn the tide, but only if enacted before it's too late."² (My italics.) So. Some countries (Japan and many in Europe) have managed to not only slow their population growth rate but to bring it down to replacement levels or even to the point where population will slowly decline. Instead of celebrating this extraordinary achievement with millions of popping champagne corks raining down as condoms, the birth-dearthers are prophesizing doom.

Longman's is not a lonely voice. Other shortsighted analysts and government leaders are also freaking out over the imagined economic and social problems of declining birth rates. From Italy and Greece to South Korea and Japan, governments are offering cash payments and other incentives to women who have more than two children. In general, the horror scenarios focus on fewer working-age people to support pension plans for retirees, schools overbuilt for the Baby Boom closing down, rural villages becoming deserted, and old tribal fears that lower-breeding groups will be overwhelmed by heavy-breeding groups (Muslims in Europe, for example). Worry about slowing growth rates is not confined to the right; a number of progressives are also overheated. Even *National Geographic* flips out on the issue, using words like "dire" and "troubling." It calls for increasing birth rates and more immigration in Europe.³

Nor are *Foreign Affairs* and similar journals Longman's only soapbox. He just wrote a Birth Dearth article for *Conservation in Practice*. *Conservation in Practice*, for

² Phillip Longman, "The Global Baby Bust," *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2004.

³ June 2005 map of Europe, National Geographic.

crying out loud. *Conservation in Practice* is published by the Society for Conservation Biology, and sponsored by The Nature Conservancy and other holdfasts of Nature conservation. How it can publish such rubbish is beyond me. What's next?

Conservation in Practice running an article from the public relations office of Exxon-Mobil proving that global climate change is a hoax?

The first thing to understand about birth-dearth fears is that they are purely economic and social. They are not *ecological*. Economic and social problems related to declining birth rates are much easier to solve than the ecological problems caused by exploding populations and overshooting carrying capacity. Those who are bug-eyed and panicky about dealing with the overblown troubles brought by population stabilization are men and women of small creativity and limited problem-solving skills. It is far better to juggle such relatively easy social and economic challenges now than when we are faced with the even-more horrendous ecological problems in the future brought by leapfrogging numbers of humans.

None of the birth-dearth wailers consider ecological consequences; theirs is a world only of human society. Other species do not exist for them. The birth-dearth hysteria is so foolish and blind, that I find it hard to take it seriously enough to dispute it. Unfortunately, we must because of the shocking way the too-few-babies drumbeat has been publicized and supported. When we conservationists take on the birth dearthers, I think we should do two things: belittle the difficulty of dealing with the social and economic problems of population stabilization and moderate decline, and emphasize the ecological problems caused by large existing populations and growing populations. If conservationists spend too much time debating the economic and social challenges of declining birth rates, we appear to accept the worldview and values of those who ignore Nature. We are fighting in their arena, not ours. We must constantly stress the ecological impacts of the population explosion. That is where our expertise lies and that is where we can show the dire consequences of overpopulation now.

Therefore, some points to make in this debate include:

- Women are choosing to have fewer children for their personal quality of life and economic security.
- The supposed problems caused by stable or slightly declining populations are economic, social, and political, not ecological.
- The birth-dearth economic problems are grossly overblown.
- At some point in the real—finite—world, growth must stop. It is easier to deal with the economic transition now than later when there are more people to feed and house (or to care for in old age).
- Worries about an imbalance between retirees and those paying into pensions can be easily solved now by merely increasing the retirement age. As Susan Morgan says, “We geezers can still work.”
- The real problems of population growth are ecological. Catastrophic climate change, habitat destruction, and mass extinction are far harder to solve when there are more people.
- Humans have already overshoot ecological carrying capacity on Earth. The greenhouse effect leading to catastrophic climate change is only one example. Earth's carrying capacity at a European level of living is several billion fewer people than the current population.

Every day, we are slapped in the face by some evidence of the capacity for mass madness our species flaunts. The birth-death fears are a particularly grotesque and fantastic example. The campaign for more babies is so out of touch with reality of any kind that is difficult to take it seriously. John Davis says, “I almost hate to see us dignify this argument by responding to it.” The need to respond, however, was underscored today in *The New York Times* with an article that read, “Japanese births rose for the first time in six years in 2006, according to government statistics announced Monday, offering a glimmer of hope for a rapidly aging society.”⁴

Does anyone have the keys to get out of this madhouse?

Happy Yule
Dave Foreman
Bosque del Apache

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⁴ “Japan Births Rise for 1st Time in 6 Yrs.,” *The New York Times*, January 1, 2007.