Why have scientists succumbed to political correctness?

Contributed by Albert Bartlett
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Editor's note: Albert A. Bartlett, Physics professor emeritus at University of Colorado at Boulder, has long been a tireless educator of the public on the subjects of energy and the fallacy of sustainable economic growth. Below he first exposes the scientific establishment on the subject of U.S. overpopulation, and following that we offer his critique of Scientific American. His bio and work history end this dispatch. - Jan Lundberg

Throughout the world, scientists are prominently involved in seeking solutions to the major global problems such as global climate change and the growing inadequacy of energy supplies. They present their writings in publications ranging from newspapers to refereed scientific journals, but with a few rare exceptions, on one point they all replace objectivity with “political correctness.” In their writings the scientists identify the cause of the problems as being growing populations. But their recommendations for solving the problems caused by population growth almost never include the recommendation that we advocate stopping population growth. Political Correctness dictates that we do not address the current problem of overpopulation in the U.S. and the world.

We can demonstrate that the Earth is overpopulated by noting the following:

A SELF-EVIDENT TRUTH

If any fraction of the observed global warming

can be attributed to the actions of humans,

then this, by itself, constitutes

clear and compelling evidence

that the human population, living as we do,

has exceeded the Carrying Capacity of the Earth,

a situation that is clearly not sustainable.

As a consequence it is AN INCONVENIENT TRUTH

that all proposals or efforts

at the local, national or global levels

to solve the problems of global warming

are serious intellectual frauds

if they fail to advocate that we address

the fundamental cause of global warming

namely overpopulation.

We can demonstrate that the U.S. is overpopulated by noting that we now (2008) import something like 60% of the petroleum that we consume, around 15% of the natural gas that we consume and about 20% of the food we eat. Because the U.S. population increases by something over 3 million per year, all of these fractions are increasing. Natural gas production in North America has peaked in spite of the drilling of hundreds of new gas wells annually. In a nutshell, the U.S. in 2008 is unsustainable.

Let's look at two prominent examples of this political correctness. The book, “An Inconvenient Truth” (1) was published to accompany Al Gore’s wonderful film by the same name. On page 216 Gore writes; “The fundamental relationship between our civilization and the ecological system of the Earth has been utterly and radically transformed by the powerful convergence of three factors. The first is the population explosion…”

It's clear that Gore understands the role of overpopulation in the genesis of global climate change. The last chapter in the book has the title, “So here’s what you personally can do to help solve the climate crisis.” The list of 36 things starts with “Choose energy-efficient lighting” and runs through an inventory of all of the usual suspects without ever calling for us to address overpopulation!

As a second example, in the Clearinghouse Newsletter (2) we read the statement, “Human Impacts on Climate” from the Council of the American Geophysical Union, The title recognizes the human component of climate change which we note is roughly proportional to the product of the number of people and their average per capita annual resource consumption. The last paragraph of the A.G.U. statement starts with the sentence, “With climate change, as with ozone depletion, the human footprint on Earth is apparent.” The rest of the paragraph suggests what must be done, and it’s all the standard boilerplate. “Solutions will necessarily involve all aspects of society. Mitigation strategies and adaptation responses will call for collaborations across science, technology, industry, and government.” Etc., Etc., Etc… There is no mention of addressing the overpopulation which the statement recognizes is the cause of the problems.

A few years ago I wrote an article calling the attention of the physics community to this shortcoming.(3) To my amazement, most of the letters to the editor responding to my article supported the politically correct unscientific point of view. (4), (5)

Many journalists look to the scientists for advice. The scientists won’t talk about overpopulation, so the journalists and the reading public can easily conclude that overpopulation is not a problem. As a result, we have things such as the cover story in TIME Magazine, April 9, 2007, “The Global Warming Survival Guide: 51 Things You Can Do to Make a Difference.” The list contained such useful recommendations as “Build a Skyscraper,” (No. 9, Pg. 74) but not one of the 51recommendations deals with the need to address overpopulation!

What's one to do when scientists and political leaders demonstrate their understanding of the fact that overpopulation is the main cause of these gigantic global problems, yet the scientists’ recommendations for dealing with the problems never call for addressing overpopulation?

(1) Al Gore, An Inconvenient Truth, The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and What We Can Do About It. Rodale Press, Emmaus, PA, 2006

(2) Teachers Clearinghouse for Science and Society Education Newsletter, Winter 2008, Pg. 19

(3) A.A. Bartlett, “Thoughts on Long-Term Energy Supplies: Scientists and the Silent Lie,” Physics Today, July 2004, Pgs. 53-55

(4) Letters: Physics Today, November 2004, Pgs. 12-18

(5) Letters: Physics Today, April 2006, Pgs. 12-15

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Scientific American and the Silent Lie

by Albert Bartlett

Editor's note: As long as the forces of industrial expansion are able to spew pro-growth propaganda that denies the laws of physics and the reality of overpopulation, the sustainability movement is at a disadvantage in reaching the public. Professor Bartlett has long been a tireless communicator for common sense in the area of energy and environment. - JL

The September 2006 issue of Scientific American(SA) is a "Special Issue" devoted to "Energy’s Future Beyond Carbon" with the subtitle "How to Power the Economy and Still Fight Global Warming." As I read the issue I thought of Captain Renault, the Chief of Police in the movie "Casablanca" who says to an assistant, "Major Strasser has been shot. Round up the usual suspects." The implication of the Chief’s order is clear. Never mind finding the culprit, just "round up the

usual suspects."

The main body of this special issue consists of nine articles relating to global warming, each dealing with one or more of the usual suspects. These are summarized in the first article, "A Climate Repair Manual." There we read that global warming is a major problem: "Preventing the transformation of the earth's atmosphere from greenhouse to unconstrained hothouse represents arguably the most imposing scientific and technical challenge that humanity has ever faced. Climate change compels a massive restructuring of the world's energy economy. The slim hope for keeping atmospheric carbon below 500 ppm hinges on aggressive programs of energy efficiency instituted by national governments." The culprit is world population growth, but SA is just rounding up the usual suspects.

The complete article on this website is at

culturechange.org

Read about Prof. Bartlett's work, courtesy oilcrisis.com:
Biographical Sketch

Professor Albert Allen Bartlett

Al Bartlett is a retired Professor of Physics who joined the faculty of the University of Colorado in Boulder in September 1950. His B.A. degree in physics is from Colgate University (1944) and his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in physics are from Harvard University (1948), (1951). In 1978 he was national president of the American Association of Physics Teachers. He is a Fellow of the American Physical Society and of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. In 1969 and 1970 he served two terms as the elected Chair of the four-campus Faculty Council of the University of Colorado.

In the late 1950s Al was an initiator of the citizens' effort to preserve open space in Boulder, and this ultimately led to the establishment of the City of Boulder's Open Space Program which (1998) has purchased over 26,000 acres of land to be preserved as public open space. He is a founding member of PLAN-Boulder County, an environmental group for the City and County.

Since the late 1960s he has concentrated on public education on the problems relating to and originating from population growth. Since 1969 he has given his lecture, "Arithmetic, Population, and Energy" over 1300 times to audiences of all levels from coast to coast. More recently he has written on sustainability, examining the widespread misuse of the term, and examining the conditions that are necessary and sufficient for sustainability in any society.

ARITHMETIC, POPULATION, AND ENERGY (A popular lecture)

Professor Bartlett lectures regularly to a wide variety of audiences from coast to coast on the topic "Arithmetic, Population, and Energy."

"The greatest shortcoming of the human race is our inability to understand the exponential function."

With these words, Prof. Bartlett starts his one-hour talk.* First he gives a very elementary introduction to the arithmetic of steady growth, showing what steady growth of population means in Boulder, in Colorado, and in the world. Then the talk examines the situation where one has steady growth in a finite environment and the results of this are applied to fossil fuels, particularly to petroleum and coal. Data from the U.S. Department of Energy are used to show that the realistic lifetimes of U.S. coal, U.S. petroleum and world petroleum are much shorter than the optimistic figures that are so often quoted. Next the talk then examines reassuring statements from experts, the press, scientists, political leaders, and others, that are wildly at odds with the facts. The talk then examines the widespread worship of economic growth and population growth throughout the western world. These facts give the listener a better understanding of the real meaning of "sustainability," which Prof. Bartlett explains in terms of the First Law of Sustainability:

"You cannot sustain population growth and / or growth in the rates of consumption of resources."

This allows the listener to appreciate fully the implications of the growth path of western society and in particular, of the United States. The talk closes with a plea for the widespread education of people on the arithmetic and consequences of growth.

September 19, 1999 is the 30th anniversary of the first time Professor Bartlett delivered the talk. In the 30 years since then he has given the talk 1325 times in 48 states, Canada, and overseas, to audiences including high school students, graduate students, community groups, scientific colloquia, scientific and non-scientific local and national conventions, and to Congressional staff people in Washington. Well over a thousand video tapes of the lecture have been sold by the University of Colorado.**

*The talk is easily divided into two parts for groups where talks are limited to a half hour.

** A one-hour videotape of this lecture is available from the University of Colorado Bookstore: call 1-303-492-6411 or Toll Free: 800-255-9168.

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