Overcrowding in Our Less and Less Natural Environment

Contributed by Jan Lundberg
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It is vital to intuitively grasp the conditions of our species in our increasingly artificial environment. As I've cultivated this approach to perception, I've come back around to overpopulation. Besides eye-popping charts with exponential growth with a curve like an L on its long side, my belief that we're overpopulated is based on decades analyzing society's dependence on petroleum.

Culture Change has been publishing articles on overpopulation before and since 2001 when we changed our publication name from Auto-Free Times magazine, flagship of the Alliance for a Paving Moratorium. "Overpopulation via Petroleum Dependence" appeared in the Auto-Free Times #16, Sept. 1999.

Some of us have seen the population growth problem as one of overcrowding, as in "rats in a cage." This is not to dehumanize people or take a heartless, clinical approach, but rather to see what we can learn from biological principles that have implications for societies (animal and human, captive and free). In our Late Fall 2001 issue of Culture Change, John Omaha, Ph.D, wrote,

"Anthropologists and population biologists studied all the wars in history for which adequate data were available. They learned that war breaks out when the percentage of the population consisting of single males in the age range 16-26 exceeds a certain fraction of the total population… whatever name is given is not correct; the correct name is overpopulation."

He concluded with this unsurpassed analysis:

The terrorists are the vanguard of the real problem: the surplus billions of people on this spherical Petri dish. Only when the true problem is identified and addressed will we escape the inevitable fate of our species -- a mass die off that will sometimes look like terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, at other times look like AIDS, and at other times like "ethnic cleansing" in Serbia.

Control of our species' reproductive drive is the central survival issue our species must solve if Homo sapiens is to be a successful evolutionary experiment. Solving the issue will require the cooperation of all human beings. We are not doing very well.

According to the Strategy Theory -- that says a species tries to reproduce more when its existence is threatened -- we have been already breeding like rabbits for over a century as a result of terroristic wars, the lock down of resources and resource-depletion by the owning elite, and more. Up against those threats, humans have bred more, although through petroleum they had the means to do it as never before.

I don't know how things'll play out for us hapless humans, but the other theory of producing fewer kids when resources and times are tougher is also borne out by a recent AP article on record births for the U.S. in 2007 before the economic downturn. Also, Dr. Virginia Abernethy's Population Politics showed that populations increase births when economic outlooks look expansive and comfortable.

Concern over population growth and overcrowding are suppressed and discussion is banned by corporate, government

and fellow-citizen pressure, as we're all expected to enjoy being crowded in and buy the story of progress.

It's time to tell it like it is, with heart and final rage perhaps, and encourage every honest person to join in.

My latest unease over population and overcrowding came as I watched a poignant movie from Spain made in 2001, "Mondays In The Sun," about working class dilemmas in the globalizing economy. As I saw the tenement buildings and lived the story of unemployed, struggling workers, three thoughts come to my mind, born of compassion and revulsion.

First, we're packed in like rats. Second, our material surroundings -- the decay of what we've built that depends on more energy and technology -- tells me that in nature is the only way for us to last or be happy. The natural world has come to be considered alien and difficult for those who “took the deal right off the shelf.”

My third thought is that the collapse that so many have glimpsed really happened quite a while ago: the collapse of the human spirit. The human spirit lives on, but it's safe to say that humanity collapsed some time back, what with the many disasters and tragedies that were allowed to be set into motion (and that continue, accelerating).

What does overpopulation study say of this, and about overcrowding? I asked two academics and writers who have contributed to Culture Change, Peter Crabb and Virginia Abernethy.

Virginia said, “One finds much more egalitarian societies where population density is low.”

Peter responded,

I agree that packing us in leads to all sorts of deviant, destructive, and anti-social behavior. It also tends to exaggerate hierarchical social structures because of huge competition to control scarce resources… We can expect more authoritarian police state kinds of social control as density increases. We are seeing that right now with “Homeland Security,” etc.

Years ago a social psychologist named Stanley Milgram (the guy who did the notorious obedience studies at Yale in the '60s) observed that as we are packed more tightly together in constructed environments like cities, we suffer from stimulus overload. Our brains do some kind of defensive shutdown that may be akin to what you call "collapse of the spirit." When I have occasion to visit Manhattan, where Milgram was teaching at the time, I see how disconnected everyone is from each other and presumably from the higher functioning parts of themselves.

About nature being "the way:"

I escaped the metro Philadelphia area 10 years ago to intentionally heal myself by living in a low-density community surrounded by forests and streams with a view of a mountain ridge. It works. You are probably familiar with Roger Ulrich's work on biophilia and landscapes. Natural surroundings

are healing and nourishing. Rectilinear hardscapes and technocrap like cell phone towers are jarring to our senses and physiologies.

U.S. policy = corporate agenda

Obviously in U.S. public policy there is no sense of urgency, or even the admission of the fact that overpopulation is something to deal with. Instead, growth is like the national religion. This is not some innocent byproduct of American exuberance left over from the pioneers, as we shall see below.

The bias for growth is shared by many other pro-economic-growth governments. Sometimes this is for the same reason that religions are pro-growth -- growth for their own believers, to outnumber their opposing religions (or ethnic neighbors).

Governments, however, are not really supreme when the global market is maximized. (An exception is China perhaps, which still has the one-child policy.) With corporate dominance extending also to the news media and entertainment, we cannot expect the self-serving corporations to advocate anything that would tend toward fewer consumers.

Corporations control the U.S. Congress, so population is increased with maximum legal immigration. The purpose is two-fold, for maximizing the number of consumers and to hurt collective bargaining which raises wages. So we see labor unions and minorities such as the Blacks in worse shape today than they were economically decades ago.

If legal immigration were cut way back, the illegal immigration that happens -- thanks in large part to humanitarian crises often caused by U.S. foreign policy and U.S. corporate agendas (e.g., Walmart) -- would not be such an issue or strain on U.S. society. Many who are concerned about U.S. population growth or immigration would not agree with me, but perhaps we can all agree that the Congressional/Corporate agenda is not what the average U.S. or Mexican citizen is necessarily benefiting from.

We are therefore on our own. Some of us have learned that putting human life at the highest level of concern no longer means maximizing our numbers. In fact, we must reduce our size so that the other species have some room too. Putting the Earth first makes the most sense, for it is in humanity's interest as well. Government, religions, corporations, academia and mainstream culture do not admit these truths, and until collapse or a popular uprising removes them, these institutions are on balance a threat to our future and our immediate survival.

The Depavers eco-rock band recorded a tune referring to overpopulation, "On Our Way," in 2001. Listen at culturechange.org/Songs/11_On_Our_Way.mp3
On our way through the smoke and the haze

Many types here we're rats in a cage

- Mandolin: Ayr; Drums: Tofu; Written, sung and strummed: Jan

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Further reading:

"Overpopulation & terrorism: rats in a cage" by John Omaha, Culture Change magazine issue #19, Sept. 2001

Milgram, S. (1970). The experience of living in cities. Science, 167, 1461-1468.

Ulrich, R. S. (1993). Biophilia, biophobia, and natural landscapes. In S. R. Kellert and E. O Wilson (Eds.), The biophilia hypothesis (pp. 73-137). Washington, DC: Island Press.

Population Politics: The Choices That Shape Our Future, Virginia D. Abernethy, Insight Books, 1993

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This report is Culture Change Letter #245

Activists are a threatened species, but there's safety in numbers. If you can't be active, please $upport your local Earth activist.