Denial of Nature's Limits is the Problem

Contributed by Aaron G. Lehmer-Chang
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Publisher's note: This article from World Shift Vision is what the New York Times should run, instead of the nonsense it ran that is addressed so well here.

This month, The New York Times published a fantastical piece on human exceptionalism entitled "Overpopulation Is Not The Problem," in which author Erle C. Ellis claimed that human societies have no limits to their growth. That's right — limits are merely an illusion. Expansion über alles! That's our species' birthright, and rightful destiny.

"There really is no such thing as a human carrying capacity," writes Ellis, castigating those of us concerned with ecological limits as believers that humans are little different than "bacteria in a petri dish." Perhaps even more outlandishly, Ellis goes on to state that "[t]he idea that humans must live within the natural environmental limits of our planet denies the realities of our entire history, and most likely the future." Who's history exactly?

As an associate professor of geography and environmental systems at the University of Maryland, Ellis should know better. Unless he steered clear of the stacks of thoughtful volumes available to him on the rise and fall of past civilizations, he would surely have encountered chronicle after chronicle of societies that faced progressively daunting ecological challenges, and which plummeted in population as a result.

Anthropologist Jared Diamond's recent treatise, Collapse, offers a sobering survey of past human overshoot: from the fall of the Anasazi of southwestern North America due to deforestation and warfare over depleting resources, to the collapse of the Maya due to overcultivation and prolonged drought, to the recent genocide in Rwanda, due in part to increasing numbers of people contending for land in a formerly sustainable subsistence economy. In each of these cases, people (quite unlike bacteria) deployed complex social and technological innovations under increasingly stressful circumstances. And yet, their societies collapsed.

The lesson we should draw from this is not that that we are immune from nature's limits. Quite the contrary: we fail to moderate our environmental impact at our own peril.

In fairness to Ellis, he rightly points out that humans are "niche creators," beings who have an impressive history of transforming ecosystems to sustain ourselves and often to facilitate our very survival. This recognition, however, does not magically exempt us from ecological processes, pressures, and limits. It simply means we must utilize our "niche creation" skills in ways that allow our planet's life-support systems to persevere.

Unfortunately, many of our world's vital ecosystems are already on the brink of collapse. Despite incredible leaps in resource-use efficiency, ecological understanding, and technological know-how, our planet's forests and sensitive habitats are being devastated far faster than they're regenerating, arable lands are turning into deserts and soils are being mined of their critical nutrients, our oceans are being overfished and polluted with more toxins than can safely be absorbed, our freshwater aquifers and waterways are being depleted at rates several times faster than they're being replenished, and our atmosphere is being flooded with so much carbon that our global climate is warming to extreme degrees. Moreover, the fossil fuels we rely on for transportation, agriculture, housing, manufacturing, and so much more are becoming harder and harder to find and extract, posing severe challenges to the very foundation of industrial civilization.

All of these realities will pose severe constraints on economic activity, which in turn, will limit human numbers. Just

because we've overcome ecological constraints in the past, expanding from smaller niches to ever-larger ones, doesn't mean we can therefore transcend our entire planet's very real ecological boundaries.

Yes, we humans are "niche creators," as Ellis so colorfully calls us. But rather than cling to the tired and dangerous myth of human exceptionalism from nature, it's time to embrace our proper role as stewards and balancers of Earth's incredible bounty. Through the knowledge we've gained from ecology, permaculture, and anthropology, we have within our power the capacity to remake our societies to respect nature's cycles, life-giving processes, and yes, even its limits — while simultaneously allowing us all to live life to its fullest. Constant expansion of our numbers isn't necessary for that vision. Humility and belief in ourselves is.

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