

Urgently Needed Now: A National Policy to Reduce U.S. Population

An NPG Position Paper
By Donald Mann, NPG President

Introduction

Thirty four years have passed since, in 1980, NPG published a 62 page booklet that I had written titled, *Urgently Needed Now: A National Policy to Reduce U.S. Population*. In that small booklet I tried to explain why we at NPG believed that such a policy was urgently needed.

NPG was founded in 1972 when our U.S. population was 210 million. It is now 318 million, an increase of 108 million in roughly four decades, or an average increase of some 2.5 million per year, or 25 million each decade. By any measure those are huge increases.

In 1972, with a population of 210 million, we believed that our country was already vastly overpopulated in terms of the long range carrying capacity of its environment and resources.

We believed then, and still do, that our population should not be allowed to exceed 150 million, in order to create an economy that would be sustainable for the very long term, and afford an adequate standard of living for all in a sound and healthy environment.

To reach that goal it was obvious that we would need a transition period of negative population growth, that could be achieved by a slight and temporary reduction in our fertility rate, but chiefly by limiting legal immigration, and reducing illegal immigration to near zero.

Unfortunately, or even tragically, we have not yet succeeded in convincing our policy makers in and out of government of the urgency of taking the course of action that we so strongly recommend, that involves halting and then reversing our population growth, until our population can be stabilized at a sustainable level.

It is now projected that, if present trends are allowed to continue, our population would reach 400 million or more by mid century. That would mean that in only 3.6 decades, from 2014 to 2050, our population would have increased by a staggering 82 million! That senseless and disastrous growth would result almost entirely from mass immigration, both legal and illegal.

The following are four chapters taken from the 16 chapters in the booklet, together with a quotation by Sir Julian Huxley who was a member of our original Board of Advisors, and was always very supportive of our efforts. We were extremely grateful for his support.

Chapter I

MANKIND AT THE CROSSROADS

It is widely recognized that further population growth carries with it the threat of catastrophic environmental disaster — no less than the breakdown of the very life support systems of our small planet, this lonely speck of cosmic dust that is the only home we have.

Environmental disaster is a very real *possibility*. But we are also faced with the virtual *certainty* that further population growth, and even population stabilization at more than some fraction of today's numbers, will condemn billions of men, women, and children to a short, brutish, miserable existence for centuries to come, and perhaps forever.

What business is humanity in? If it is in the business of trying to determine how many people the earth can possibly be made to support (never mind for how long), of trying to transform our infinitely varied and beautiful planet into one gigantic food factory (never mind if all other animal species are driven into extinction), where people will exist like so many farm animals, cheek by jowl at the feeding trough (never mind the quality of life, never mind, art, science, and culture), of trying to maximize human misery, then let population continue to increase.

On the other hand, if humanity is, or should be, in the business of trying to eliminate hunger and poverty, of trying to create a society that will be sustainable indefinitely in a sound and healthy environment, with a base of material prosperity that will minimize human suffering and allow civilization to flourish, then we had better set about without further delay to halt and then reverse population growth.

The task of doing so is awe inspiring in its complexity and magnitude. But we cannot allow ourselves to be deterred by the anticipated difficulty of achieving a goal that is essential to our very survival, at least under conditions that make life worth living. A person caught in a burning building does not sit down and calculate the odds of getting out. He does everything he can to escape certain death.

But, whatever our chances of success, it would be ignominious to surrender to even overwhelming odds. Every fiber of our being should revolt against the grim

fate to which population growth is inexorably leading us, and against those supine minds that accept it as inevitable.

We can have *either* overpopulation, *or* a good life. We cannot, with all our science and technology, to which we owe so much, have both. No responsible scientist can discern any scientific or technological miracle on the horizon that could save us from the inevitable consequences of overpopulation.

If we continue to believe in miracles, if we continue to ignore the constraints to growth imposed by a finite world, technological and industrial man may well turn out to be a strictly temporary phenomenon in the long history of life on this planet.

We are a living at a momentous time in history. We still have the power — if we can only develop the will — to halt and reverse population growth. *That power, if not exercised, may no longer exist even a few years from now.*

Mankind today stands at a crossroads. One road, that of further population growth, leads inevitably to starvation, poverty, social chaos, and war. It leads to the certain destruction of all that we hold dear, including personal freedom and political liberty, peace and security, a decent standard of living, a healthy environment, wilderness, and wildlife.

The other road — that of population stabilization after a transition period of population decrease — is the road that humanity must start down *now*. It leads through pleasant fields to the broad, sunlit highlands where the human race can live in peace and prosperity for as long as spaceship earth shall continue to exist.

The need for a drastic reduction in population size is worldwide, and means to achieve it abroad will be discussed in a later chapter. But there are many reasons why the United States should take the lead by reducing its own population. Among them are:

- To do so would be in our national interest.
- Only if we do so ourselves can we urge other nations to do so.
- As the world's greatest consumer and polluter, we have an obligation to other nations, and to future generations, to reduce our demands on the globe's resources.

Chapter II

THE DEEPENING CRISIS

The late Emile Benoit, Professor Emeritus of Economics at Columbia University, warned that the “exponential growth syndrome,” and the undervaluation of pollution and of depletion of resources, threaten the very survival of humanity, or at least of advanced civilization.

Dr. Benoit defined the exponential growth syndrome as the presence of attitudes and institutions that make a continuation of exponential growth necessary to avoid various evils such as unemployment, inflation, increased poverty, and inequality. The syndrome includes reliance on desperate expedients and technological fixes, and living on resource capital to assure the continuance of growth.

He urged recognition of the fact that we are now in an emergency of unsurpassed gravity and long duration, and defined the problem in the following terms:

“Our earth, we now begin to realize, does not and cannot supply us with an unlimited amount of usable energy, foodstuffs, safe dumping grounds for our waste products — or even standing room. It is much more like an interplanetary vehicle, where resources must be carefully conserved, waste products must be minimized and recycled, and where the number of passengers must be carefully limited to those that can be taken aboard without overcrowding ... We have, in effect, a revolution of rising expectations, superimposed on a population explosion, in a world of fixed dimensions, and limited productive capacity. Therein lies the problem.”

RESOURCES

But are resources limited? Some people make the truly astonishing claim that they are infinite. It has even been asserted that resources are like muscles, and grow with use! But that is dangerous nonsense, and intrinsically silly. People with such ideas are living in a never-never world of purely theoretical concepts. Although we have barely entered the Age of Shortages, the looming scarcity of energy and materials increasingly reminds us of

the unalterable facts of the physical universe.

Resources are, of course, limited. And the sheer magnitude of projected resource demand in a world of rising population and growing per capita consumption is overwhelming.

Dr. Benoit calculated that, if present growth rates were to continue, in a thousand years the weight of minerals mined would exceed the weight of the earth. He was well aware, of course, that potentially minable minerals exist only in a small portion of the earth’s crust.

Professor E. J. Mishan, the distinguished British economist expressed a widely held view regarding the global outlook for resources when he wrote:

“Turning to material resources, in particular fossil fuels and metals, a common estimate is that, if present consumption trends persist, we shall run out of oil by about the end of the century even allowing for the discovery of new reserves, and of all but a few of today’s ‘essential’ metals within about 50 years. Indeed, at current rates of usage, all known reserves of silver, copper, platinum, tin, and zinc will have been used up within a couple of decades.”

As for the national outlook, the increasing dependence of the United States on imported fuels and raw materials is well known. According to Lester Brown, President of Worldwatch Institute:

“Projections show, however, that by 1985 the United States will be dependent on imports for more than half its supplies of nine of the 13 basic raw materials. Among these are iron ore, aluminum or bauxite, and tin.”

But there is little reason to believe that increasing materials demand in this country can long continue to be met by imports. The implications of this fact for our economy, our standard of living, and our national security, are staggering. The former director of the United States Geological Survey, V. E. McKelvey, has noted:

“Identified and undiscovered reserves and resources for most minerals are adequate for anticipated world demand only for the

next several decades and potential resources of only a few minerals appear sufficient to last for a century or longer. Even when recognizing that the resources now foreseen can be supplemented by further exploration, technologic advance, recycling and prevention of waste, conservation of use, and substitution of abundant for scarce materials, there is not a lot of comfort in this analysis, either with respect to current trends or our long-term potential. Considering the world situation — rising consumption, increasing competition for minerals, rising prices, and increasing national control over minerals — our increasing dependence on foreign sources is disturbing to say the least.”

Dr. Preston Cloud, Professor Emeritus of Biogeology and Environmental Studies at the University of California, has pointed out that the mining, extraction, and beneficiation of ores to produce metals is achieved at a large cost in available energy:

“For example, about 16% of all energy used in the U.S. in 1975 was expended for a domestic mineral production that fell 25% short of demand. Energy required, moreover, increases exponentially as the grade of ore decreases to some grade beyond which energy inputs rise abruptly and steeply. The 16% of the U.S. energy budget that presently goes for mineral production will increase substantially as we seek to reduce our dependence on foreign sources.

“As the price of energy itself goes up, the hard-currency cost of non-energy mineral procurement will also increase, and with consequent braking effects on the economy. Any attempt to maintain trends in mineral procurement and use at currently projected levels will, within a few decades, precipitate a train of new crises, not only in energy, but in a variety of materials as well, not to mention environmental feedbacks of increasing gravity.”

Our economy, and our national security are, of course, dependent on adequate supplies of many kinds of materials. It is impossible to escape the conclusion that, because of rapid depletion of essential resources,

our nation is on a collision course with disaster in the not too distant future. In order to avoid disaster, we must sharply reduce, and then stabilize, total demand for material resources.

A drastic reduction in the size of our population is essential if such a reduction in demand is to be achieved without a severe drop in our standard of living. Conservation measures, the elimination of waste, increased recycling, and simplification of lifestyles are all necessary. *They would not be sufficient, however, to reduce material demand to a sustainable level, without a substantial reduction in our numbers.*

THE ENVIRONMENT

As Professor John Holdren has noted, overpopulation carries with it the threat of irretrievable damage to the life-support systems of our nation and our planet:

“This, then, is the central issue that is missed by those who view environmental concerns as a matter of nuisances, damage to scenery, and dirty air and water: with industrial nations in the forefront, mankind is systematically diminishing the capacity of the environment to perform its essential functions of pest control, nutrient cycling, waste management, and climate regulation, at the same time that growing population and rising consumption per person are creating even larger demands for these services.

“Evidently, the inadequacy of present scientific knowledge to predict the time and character of the ultimate breakdown in this process is often taken to be grounds for complacency, but our ignorance here should be alarming, not reassuring.”

Several years ago, 36 of Great Britain’s most distinguished scientists endorsed the basic principles of a study called, *A Blueprint for Survival*. The study warned that demand for natural resources is becoming so great that it will exhaust reserves and inevitably cause,

“the breakdown of society and the irreversible destruction of the life-support systems on this planet, possibly by the end of the century, *certainly within the lifetimes of our children.*” (Emphasis added.)

A sensible population policy (and economic policy, and energy policy) should start with the realization that the environment is a resource of limited size. It should be based on recognition of the imminent possibility of abusing our air, water, and land beyond the limits of tolerance.

A recent study by the National Academy of Sciences states that,

“The environmental impact of mineral resource extractions, processing and use can change the total ecological balance of the earth’s surface and near surface.... The environmental consequences of supplying huge quantities of materials to an ever increasing population are frightening....”

The same study points out the dangers of blundering along in a state of semi-ignorance of the consequences of our actions, like a blindfolded man stumbling about on the edge of a cliff:

“One of the most powerful arguments in favor of a general restriction (of growth) is that our inability to perceive ill effects far enough in advance or clearly enough exposes us to the danger of crossing one or even more points of no return and waking up to find ourselves in a very undesirable position without being able to do anything about it... Finally, if we are running the risk of going beyond points of no return, common sense certainly urges that it is better to err on the side of caution.” (Emphasis added.)

Negative Population Growth, Inc., (NPG) believes that the last sentence in the above quotation is a key guiding principle. In the management of trusts and estates, trustees are guided by the “prudent man rule” - what would a prudent man do in a given situation? Should our national destiny be guided by any lesser principle?

THE ROLE OF POPULATION

Most informed people would agree that this country is faced with critical problems of resource sufficiency and environmental pollution - problems that threaten to destroy both our material standard of living, and the

quality of our lives, and that threaten as well to undermine our national security. But wait! Do these problems have anything to do with population size and growth?

Just as there are “experts” who claim that resources are infinite, there are a number of “experts” who advance the curious view that population size is a negligible factor with regard to resource and environmental problems. Dr. Norman Ryder, of the Office of Population Research at Princeton University has said, for example,

“The kind of population growth that now seems likely poses no major problems that I can see. We have a host of problems in this country. But population seems to me to be a relatively minor component.”

A far more persuasive view has been expressed by Professor John Holdren:

“The reason for the widespread neglect of the population factor in the energy situation — and most other problems related to resources and environment — is that many observers regard such problems as primarily the result of faulty technologies and high rates of growth of consumption per capita rather than of population size or growth rate. This view can only arise from a failure to comprehend the implications of the multiplicative relationships that actually prevail. Essentially, total consumption equals population times consumption per capita; total pollution equals total consumption times pollution per unit of consumption.”

Of course! Population size and growth *are* decisive factors in resource depletion and environmental pollution. What kind of topsy-turvy thinking could deny it?

WE NEED TO ACT – NOW

All signs point to the fact that this country is in the early stages of a grave crisis, marked by rapid depletion of essential resources, and by environmental pollution — problems that science and technology alone cannot possibly solve. The fundamental cause of the crisis is too many Americans.

Time is of the essence. The hour is already very late. Common sense dictates that the only reasonable and *prudent* course to follow is drastically to reduce our impact on the environment as quickly as possible. This can only be done in two ways. Both are essential:

1. Reduce our population, and then stabilize it at a size that will be sustainable over the very long run – *at not more than* half our present numbers of about 230 million.
2. Reduce per capita consumption of energy and materials, and per capita pollution, by improved technology, and by simplifying life-styles.

We should not need the threat of disaster to persuade us to take corrective action *now* by reducing our numbers (by reducing the birth rate by voluntary measures). A rational society would chart its future course on a better-worse basis, and be guided by cost/benefit analyses of the options before it. To be adopted, recommended change should only need to demonstrate that potential large benefits far outweigh minor or trivial costs.

If we insist, however, before changing our present course, on having irrefutable scientific proof that present trends will bring on sudden and total disaster no later than the day after tomorrow; if we require, moreover, that the disaster be minutely detailed as to its precise character, then, by the time such proof is available, we would have already passed the point of no return. By then it would be too late to take remedial action.

But we already have a more than adequate data base upon which to make policy decisions. There is every reason to take corrective action *now* – and no reason for further delay. The problem is not shortage of data, but rather our inability to perceive the consequences of the information we already possess — and with this our reluctance to do what needs to be done.

Is there any earthly reason why we as a nation should flirt with grave danger? Of course not. The probability of disaster can, and should be, reduced to the vanishing point.

Do the risks and foreseeable consequences of stabilizing U.S. population at present or even higher than present levels justify a national population policy aimed at reducing our numbers drastically? *The answer is a resounding YES!*

Chapter III

WHY A NATIONAL POPULATION POLICY?

The United States is already dangerously overpopulated. The population size of this country far exceeds the long-range carrying capacity of our resources and environment, yet we continue to grow rapidly.

Now about 230 million, our population is increasing by approximately three million each year – or 30 million each decade. This growth is due to the excess of births over deaths, plus legal and illegal immigration.

If the present growth rate were to continue, by the end of the century our numbers would increase to nearly 300 million. That would mean the addition of some 60 million more people in the short space of two decades.

The population size of the United States is a vital national issue. Our individual welfare and national well-being are inextricably bound up with this question. Eventually, U.S. population must be stabilized. The only question is, at what level. In the words of the National Environmental Policy Act:

“How do we create and maintain conditions under which man and nature can live in productive harmony, and fulfill the social, economic, and other requirements of present and future generations of Americans?”

At what population size, 100 million, or 300 million or more, would we be able to create such conditions? Simply to ask the question is to know something about the answer.

Too many people already put intolerable demands on our resources and environment, and might eventual-

ly destroy our modern civilization. We should not be lulled into complacency by the fact that the dimensions of the crisis are as yet only dimly perceived. Almost any size population — together with almost any level of per capita consumption — can be sustained for a few years, or even for a few decades.

But surely our goal should be to create a society that will be sustainable for more than just a generation or two. Should it not be to create a society sustainable indefinitely in a sound and healthy environment, with a decent standard of living for all? Such a goal is incompatible with a nation of 300 million, or even 200 million Americans.

Since we are *already* overpopulated, we should make every effort to avoid *any* further growth in numbers. Furthermore, we must recognize that even population stabilization at the present level would not be sufficient. Our impact on the environment in terms of resource depletion and environmental pollution is already too great to be sustainable over the long term.

Nor can we afford to wait until we somehow drift to an end to population growth in this country before starting to plan for a reduction in numbers. While it is true that we must advance one step at a time, we should recognize that ultimate goals shape present policies. Zero population growth, until our population size has been reduced, should last no more than a moment in time, as we pass from a growing to a decreasing population. Population stabilization should be our goal, but only after a transition period of negative population growth.

There is steadily mounting evidence that the most critical problems facing this nation — shortage of energy, rapid depletion of essential resources, and environmental pollution — cannot be solved without a *drastic reduction* in the size of our population.

Only with an explicit national population policy could such a reduction in population be achieved.

We urgently need to start *now* on the path toward a planned and orderly reduction in our numbers, by lowering the birth rate by voluntary measures. In addition, we must balance immigration with emigration so that migration does not result in a net increase in our numbers. In order to achieve negative population growth, NPG advocates a national population policy based on six essential features:

1. Long-range population planning in the 50-100 year range.
2. Specific numerical goals with regard to population size.
3. Specific numerical goals with regard to the total fertility rate (average number of births per woman).
4. A drastic reduction of immigration to the level of emigration, so that, on balance, annual migration does not result in a net increase in our numbers.
5. A timetable to reach the goals set.
6. Systematic government measures to achieve, and then maintain, the population size set as a goal.

Our detailed recommendations will be set forth in the chapters that follow. We want to make it clear at this point, however, that we oppose compulsory measures, or mandatory limitation of family size.

Our recommendations focus principally on financial and economic incentives and disincentives in order to encourage small families, and discourage large ones. Such measures would not be coercive, and would be compatible with traditional American values of personal freedom.

Chapter XI

A DECREASING POPULATION AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

Economist Mancur Olson has sensibly and succinctly defined economic growth as follows:

“If real (that is price-deflated) Net National Product per capita has gone up, there has been economic growth, and otherwise there hasn’t.”

This admirable definition of economic growth goes to the heart of the matter by putting the emphasis where it belongs — on *per capita* economic growth. It is unfortunate that economic growth is almost always thought of and defined as growth in GNP — the aggregate *national* output of goods and services.

The distinction between *per capita* economic growth and growth of GNP is a vital one. *Over the long run, growth of GNP will, paradoxically, destroy real [that is, per capita] economic growth and our standard of living along with it.* That is because aggregate economic growth must inevitably result in the exhaustion of the resources needed for the continued functioning of our advanced civilization, and/or the destruction of the environment on which we depend for our very lives.

Per capita economic growth must continue for a considerable time before eventually levelling off, if we are to eliminate poverty and achieve a high average standard of living for all. The *only* way a high average standard of living can be achieved and *sustained* over the long run is by stabilizing our population size at not more than half present numbers.

But even during the transition period of negative population growth, evidence indicates that the *rate* of per capita economic growth would be more rapid with a decreasing than with a growing population.

During most, if not all, of the roughly 100-year transition period of population decrease, the ratio of net producers to net consumers would be greater than with a growing population, and per capita income would consequently tend to be greater.

With a decreasing population, there would be a greater capital accumulation, first, because of the relatively older population (older people save more), and second, because ability to save is related to family size: the smaller the family the greater the ability to save.

Furthermore, a larger share of capital investment could be channeled into increasing productivity and raising living standards, rather than into creating and

maintaining the infra-structure of new schools, roads, hospitals, shopping centers, etc., to provide for a growing population.

With a decreasing population there would be less demand for limited natural resources than with a growing population. Consequently, there would be less need for the exploitation of marginal resources such as low-grade ores, resulting in lower costs than would otherwise be the case. There would also be smaller expenditures for pollution control.

It is becoming increasingly apparent that our resource base is simply not adequate to support our present numbers, let alone a larger population size. Further population growth in this country, or even population stabilization at our present size, would inevitably result in a severe drop in our standard of living.

Over the long run real economic growth per capita can only be achieved if NPG's goal is reached.

Sir Julian Huxley once wrote,

“The recognition of an optimum population size (of course relative to technological and social conditions) is an indispensable first step towards that planned control of population which is necessary if man's blind reproductive urges are not to wreck his ideals and his plans for material and spiritual betterment.”

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