

BY KELPIE WILSON

Slogans have a surprising amount of power; take "Earth First!" for example. And bumpersticker politics is always bound to offend someone. Ever since the "Malthus Was Right" bumpersticker appeared, there have been people who have objected that overpopulation is an exceedingly complex issue and can in no way be reduced to a slogan like "Malthus Was Right."

Malthus was actually the first known thinker in the history of western civilization to challenge the idea of unlimited growth in both the economy and in human population.

He was motivated by a concern for the problem of human misery, though his proposed solution, to starve the poor, was both morally reprehensible and totally ineffective in reducing the birth rate.



Conversely, William Godwin, Karl Marx and other social revolutionaries pointed to human greed and capitalism as the root cause of social injustice and misery. That school of thought, if it concerns itself with overpopulation at all, views it as a mere symptom of a larger problem of capitalism.

Native American author, Ward Churchill, offers the example of indigenous people who generally have more egalitarian social relations that operate by consensus.

But civilization was built on the destabilization of traditional tribal cultures, turning women into baby factories and men into slaves. It has been the same process from its beginnings in Mesopotamia and the Nile, to the imperialism of the nineteenth century, and finally to the global corporate rampage of today.

The solution is to bring about both economic justice and population reduction at the same time. Some examples of societies that are attempting this are: China, Cuba, the Indian state of Kerala, and some experimental communities in Costa Rica.

Most population activists today are fully aware that dropping condoms from an airplane is not going to be enough. But, in contrast, the much touted "demographic transition" which has brought birth rates down in the "first world" through increased "standard of living" (read: consumption) came at the expense of the colonization and subjugation of the "third world."

I say that colonization tipped the balance because population pressure itself has always existed and has been highly significant in the development of agricultural civilizations like India's. Paleontologists have concluded that it was possible for nomadic, stone-age people to obtain a high protein diet with less than four hours of work per day.

It is no coincidence that large scale agriculture didn't begin until the human species had spread all across the globe, occupying every available niche. Once humans stopped gathering and began agricultural production, they stepped out of natural balance with the ecosys-

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tem. This introduced a totally new kind of thinking. Whereas gatherer-hunters had to adjust their numbers to what the Earth would freely yield, agriculturalists could produce more food by putting more people to work.

The fact is that even if people had wanted to come back into balance with nature by reducing their numbers, this was never an easy thing to do. According to anthropologist Marvin Harris, stone-age women like the !Kung Bushmen were able to naturally suppress ovulation by prolonged nursing in combination with their high protein, low fat diet.

Under these conditions, the only options were abortion and infanticide. (Harris states that the existence of herbal contraceptives is mainly a folk mythology.) Primitive abortion techniques were very brutal and dangerous to women.

To see overpopulation merely as a symptom of a larger problem is also to ignore the problem of human fertility control as a determinant of just social systems. Let's look at India again. India has been cited as an example of a society that had its numbers under control before colonialism, but how was this accomplished?

Is there anyone who would describe this system as socially just? Colonialism curtailed these practices at the same time that it introduced other destabilizing factors that tipped the balance toward population explosion in India.

Green and fertility control must be considered as a whole. There will be some kind of population control because there are limits to the Earth; Malthus was absolutely right about that. The real issue is what kind—will it be patriarchal and devalue women, or will it be just? Modern contraceptives and abortion, though not without pain, avoid the more traumatic and unjust necessities of infanticide and devaluation of women.

"Love Your Mother, Don't Become One" is another bumpersticker that some find offensive, but it need not be viewed as an attack on mothers, but rather as an affirmation that one very good way of loving the Earth is the conscious choice not to breed.

I've also thought of starting an "Artemis Society" to honor childless women. Artemis was the "virgin" or childless Goddess who was the guardian of the animals. The Ladakh and Tibetan cultures honored childless women. Many of them became celibate Buddhist nuns which helped keep the population stable.

Extinction Movement has a "Meritorious Service Award" for "not adding another human to the existing billions." Write him for this attractive certificate to display on your wall.

I don't mean to say that children themselves are not valuable. Kids are usually more wild and more fun than adults. Since I've settled down and become more of a bioregional rather than nomadic activist, I've had more exposure to kids and it is definitely enriching.

Pro-natalism is that cultural attitude that automatically praises birth and parenthood, no matter what the circumstances. This ingrained attitude shows up everywhere, even in the *EE!* Journal. Greg Gordon in his article "Malthus Was Wrong" (Beltane, 1993 issue) made a statement with pro-natalist overtones: "There is nothing more wild, more natural and more sacred than giving birth."

Kelpie Wilson is an Earth First! leg wrestling expert who left her lucrative engineering position to become an underpaid Forest Activist.

Here is a short bibliography of works I found helpful in understanding the complexities of overpopulation.

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Everything depends on what the people are capable of wanting. Enrico Malatesta



## Teenage Pregnancy

by Kelpie Wilson

Let's start with the statistics: nationwide, one in ten girls between 15 and 19 becomes pregnant every year. 23,000 girls of age 14 or younger also get pregnant. Of the first group, only about 16% intended to get pregnant, and only 25% will marry as a result.

Alarmed by the rising teen pregnancy rates and costs to the state for welfare and health care, Oregon Governor Barbara Roberts announced in January a crusade against teen pregnancy. Locally, RAPP (Reducing Adolescent Pregnancy Program) has been active for over a year.

Although the pregnancy rate has been rising over the past few years, and particularly among the younger girls, some have pointed out that teen pregnancy was actually higher in the 1950s. So what's the problem, really?

In the 50s, the Illinois Valley was a very different place. 35 sawmills worked overtime turning the forests to planks and sawdust. Why would a boy bother finishing school when he could be making money and partying? Why should a girl worry about getting pregnant when there was a pretty good chance the guy would marry her and their marriage would work out?

when the natural resources of the valley were being liquidated at full clip. Certainly nobody worried about kids getting an education. Uneducated workers were less likely to challenge the authority of the mill owners. Besides, education would only make the mind-numbing mill jobs harder to bear.

In the Illinois Valley now there is only one mill barely hanging on to one shift. The forests and minerals are about gone and so are the salmon. There are no jobs and not much of a future for kids growing up here. An education can be the ticket out, but it's not easy. For girls, a pregnancy decides the question, at least for a while.

I see these girls, pushing strollers along the highway, on their way to town to buy a pack of cigarettes. The babies seem happy enough, but the toddlers often appear slightly bruised from neglect and have a dazed look in their eyes that comes from being constantly shifted back and forth between grandma and mom and babysitters till the child doesn't know who it belongs to.

Until the forests grow back and rivers heal, bringing the salmon back, there are too many human beings in this valley. From an ecological point of view, there's nothing to support us here. There is a little agriculture in the rocky bottomlands, but it would be hard to feed everyone in the valley. I don't know how many people could survive off of acorns and deer, but I don't see anyone volunteering to try it.

The water supply is very limited, so large scale tourist development isn't possible, though more and more gray-haired environmental refugees from southern California are moving here. A tight-fisted bunch with their government checks, nonetheless, there are some jobs in building their homes and caring for their health.

The government check makes life possible here, and the government is sending the message louder and louder to children having children, that it is tired of paying the bill for their reproductive behavior.

Meanwhile, back in the cities where there are still good paying jobs and fat suburbs, the typical yuppie family bloats itself with daily trips to consumer outlets, accumulating masses of cheap imported stuff to fill the 3000 square foot storage lockers they call "home."

And what about their poor yuppie kids? Too busy getting and spending to relate to children, their parents turn them over to the TV early on. 500 channels later, they are highly educated mass consumers, programmed to suck resources. Why isn't the state up in alarm about the spawning of these little resource sharks? Why aren't these parents and children getting the message of redundancy from their government? The most ecological approach would be to levy a huge tax on middle class parents for each new consumer they bring into our exhausted world.

Our country needs a population policy. Ecologically, most of us are now redundant. Population is limited by the least available resource necessary for life, and ultimately, that resource is energy. We pretend like they won't, but soon the fossil fuels will run out. According to Dr. Paul Werbos of the US Department of Energy, renewable energy sources like solar, wind and hydropower can support about 60 million people in this country with a reasonable standard of modern comfort. We now have 260 million people. If nothing changes, by 2050 we'll have 530 million.

I brought my slideshow on overpopulation to the RAPP group for their approval to show it in the high school. I explained that I hoped it would help some kids to connect their reproductive decisions to a larger whole. Many kids are very concerned about the environment, and if they knew they wanted to limit their families from beginning, they might be more conscious about family planning.

To my great surprise, the slideshow turned out to be the most controversial program RAPP has looked into yet. The Mormon minister completely dropped out of RAPP because it was even being considered. The other ministers and their flocks turned out in force to express their disapproval. They claimed that overpopulation couldn't possibly be a problem because all the human beings in the world can fit into an area the size of Texas.

The school nurse didn't disagree with the facts in the slideshow, but she felt it was too dismal and heavy to show to the students. She wanted to protect them from a harsh reality.

Because of the controversy, the teachers and social workers decided that the slideshow couldn't be shown to the general student population, but perhaps students who got parental permission could see it.

The one student who was there disagreed with the consensus and thought the slideshow would have a positive effect of some kind. She told everyone there: "I think kids should see this. What kids really need is good information." ♪