

FROM THE CENTER

The Tyranny of Population Growth



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A SHORT LIST OF PROBLEMS RESOURCE MANAGERS FACE INCLUDES: SPECIES LOSS WORLDWIDE; A DECLINE IN FORESTED LAND PER PERSON; A HOLE IN THE OZONE LAYER; AN INCREASE IN CONSUMPTION OF GOODS AND SERVICES; EXPANSION OF SUBDIVISIONS INTO FORMERLY RURAL AREAS; A VAST INCREASE IN STRIFE OVER PUBLIC LAND MANAGEMENT; A DECLINE IN HUNTING OPPORTUNITIES; AND AN INCREASE IN REGULATION TO DEAL WITH THESE PROBLEMS. THE COMMON THEME RUNNING THROUGH ALL OF THESE PROBLEMS IS HUMAN POPULATION GROWTH.

The wildlife profession grew up dealing with the primary problem facing game species at the turn of the last century: over-exploitation. Deer and ducks, bighorn and beaver were exploited, largely for markets, to the point where most were near extinction. Early leaders of our profession, many of whom were members of the Boone and Crockett Club, led the fight toward sustainable use of wildlife resources.

Later during this century, especially during the Dust Bowl years and also the years following WWII, alteration of habitat became the most serious threat to wildlife populations. Wildlife conservation and management developed as an applied scientific discipline with a focus on reducing consumption and increasing production.

Conservationists can be proud of our many successes. Populations of deer, elk, beaver, and other game species have rebounded to the point where they are considered pests in many areas. Predators, long maligned for their way of life, are making tremendous comebacks. Mountain lions have quietly returned to much of their former range in the western United States, and the wolf has returned somewhat less quietly. Grizzlies soon may be delisted in parts of their range.

We have also had some successes with habitat. We know much more about the habitat needs of deer, duck, turkey, spotted owl, and Kirtland's warbler than our predecessors. We know what destroys habitat for these species and how to create or restore it. Society has demonstrated, through laws, regulations, and in our private actions, that

these habitats, at least in certain places and times, have a higher value than competing human uses.

Our glaring failure has been in treating the symptoms of wildlife conservation problems rather than their root cause.

The impact of humans on our environment is a function of per capita consumption of resources times the number of people consuming those resources. We have done an excellent job, with some resources, in convincing people to reduce consumption and to recycle. But if we reduce per capita consumption, or increase per capita production, by 10%, 20%, or 30% but the number of humans increases by similar or higher rates, what have we gained?

I argue that we have lost. We have certainly lost space per individual. One of the more popular bumper stickers in Montana right now, one I have on my truck, says simply "Cows, Not Condos." We are also losing wild species, wild areas, and quality hunting opportunities.

Conservationists have focussed almost exclusively on consumption. One hundred and fifty years ago, people could harvest bison at any rate they wished. With an increased market and more harvesters, the over-harvest was stopped by laws and regulations.

One hundred and fifty years ago, people could drop their wastes into our rivers with little noticeable impact: the solution to pollution was dilution. With an increased number of residents and more wastes per capita, laws and regulations were passed to reduce the impacts.

One hundred and fifty years ago, who would have thought - or cared - that cutting trees would have an impact on non-game wildlife populations? With increased use of trees, and an increased number of people using forest products, laws such as the National Forest Management Act, the Endangered Species Act, and National Environmental Policy Act were passed to reduce the impact.

We continue to pass more laws and regulations to control demand in an over-subscribed system. Clearly, our individual freedom is inversely proportional to our population. One of our most basic freedoms is that of repro-

ductive freedom, but uncontrolled population growth leads to a reduction in all other freedoms: a tyranny of population growth.

The world's human population, currently approaching 6 billion, is growing (births minus deaths) at a rate of 3 per second or approximately 250,000 each day. Natural resource managers must deal with this growth, and plant and animal life must adapt or perish. People everywhere dream of consuming like Americans. What happens when we compromise between wildlife habitat and the demands of more people? The trade-offs almost always mean a net increase in the proportion of Earth's productivity that is used by humans and a net decrease in the proportion of the Earth's productivity allocated to wild areas.

Despite the tyranny of population growth, taking away reproductive freedom will not be socially feasible, politically possible, or morally acceptable in the near future. What we can do, quite easily, is point out the importance of human population growth to anyone who will listen. There are few conservation issues that are not affected by human population pressures, and we must point out these relationships. When talking about the effects of further subdivision on wildlife, point out the root problem. When talking about problems with hunting access on private lands, point out why this is occurring. When talking about further restrictions on bag limits, point out the limits to growth. Identify, not implicitly but explicitly, the trade-offs.

I believe we must continue to encourage a reduction in consumption and work on increasing production. We must also continue to encourage shared uses of our wild lands and natural resources. But if that is all we do, we're continuing to fiddle while our wildlife legacy is lost. We must point out to anyone who will listen, and recognize ourselves, that human population growth is a grave threat to individual freedoms and to all that we as wildlife conservationists hold dear. There are no easy answers, but education is a start.