

Our growing world

An essay by Mark Ireland.

A COUPLE WEEKS AGO, WHILE READING THE *ROTARIAN* MAGAZINE, I HAPPENED UNTO AN ARTICLE CONCERNING THE VERY MUCH UNHEEDED TOPIC OF GLOBAL OVER-POPULATION (DEC., 1991). THE CONTENTS OF THIS ARTICLE SO ARRESTED MY ATTENTION I FELT COMPELLED TO ENLIGHTEN MY FELLOW COMRADES SO MUCH EN-RAPT WITH THE WORLD OF ACADEME.

DO YOU REALIZE THAT SINCE 1968 (JUST 24 YEARS AGO) THE WORLD POPULATION HAS INCREASED BY OVER 66% IN REAL NUMBERS — i.e. from approximately 3.5 to over 5.3 billion? Have you ever given thought that our world population is increasing exponentially? Consider, for

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example, the obvious difference between, say, the number 10^2 and 10^3 ; the latter is ten times the former! A mere example, but one of invaluable assistance nonetheless. Could you imagine that in Central America alone, from 1950 to 1990 (40 years) the number of able, reproductive women has increased almost 320% — i.e. from approx. 2.1 million to 6.7 million? Or that in many African states the annual growth rate on average is about 3.35? I know, these figures might sound incredible at first, but they are hard, cold facts!

ACCORDING TO U.N AND OTHER RELIABLE ESTIMATES, OVER THE NEXT THIRTY YEARS THE world population should soar from the present 5.3 billion to around 11.68 billion people — an increase of over 220%! This was certainly to me a horrific revelation, to say the least, especially considering our planet's already - stretched limits. I need not remind you of the thousands, even millions in our world who are chronically malnourished and others literally in arrant fear of starvation on a daily basis. These include children, teens, and adults, not only in the well-known, and seemingly hopeless third world but even those on the streets of N.Y., Tokyo, London, Mexico City and elsewhere (just to name a few).

TODAY'S WORLD SEES FREQUENTLY THE RAVAGES OF DROUGHT, THE RAPID DEFORESTATION in virtually all lands, the gradual heating up of the atmosphere. Water consumption is at record highs, while water-tables sink lower into the ground. In China, for instance, water shortage is predicted for 450 of its 644 cities by the year 2000. In Brazil, rain-forest depletion remains an ever-increasing source of frustration — both among the unscrupulous land-grabbers and the wretched poor, who find that even the lush-looking forests offer no better hope of survival. Even in the United States, among the world's leading utilizers of water, the effects are being felt. Not three years ago I was in the famed city of Santa Barbara. That summer the city's water reservoirs went dry; unthinkable to those Californians who just love watering their lawns!

AT PRESENT, NOT ONLY ARE HUMANS REALIZING THE LIMITS ON NATURAL RESOURCES, BUT environmental "consciousness" has been stirred. Humans are much more cautious now about what measures are to be taken in the name of progress, or anything else. You simply

do not cut down forests and replace them with cattle (as Brazil has begun to realize, much of its displeasure). In fact, over-grazing is a problem of great concern in many countries that once boasted of agricultural pre-dominance. Nor is it acceptable today to pollute major (or any at all), if not only sources of water. Neither do you befuddle the air you breathe. What then will be the plight of humans yet?

HUMAN CITIES, ALREADY BURSTING AT THE SEAMS (TO USE A WORN ANALOGY) ARE ONLY GOING TO GET bigger. That means more refuse to dispose of, more garbage bags (and overflowing landfills), and ultimately, disease. What happens when a city of, say, 1.5 million, a "modest" size really, is exposed to potentially lethal disease — of endemic proportions?

AIDS, JUST TO MENTION ONE PARTICULARLY WORRISOME DISEASE, IS NOW A FACT OF LIFE. ALTHOUGH certain research appears promising, i.e. seems close to producing some sort of tolerable (maybe viable) treatment, the disease I fear, can at best be reduced to the level of

POPULATION EXPLOSION

THESE ARE JUST SOME OF THE MAJOR ISSUES AT THE FOREFRONT OF ANY SERIOUS CONSIDERATION of humanity's present demographical problems. The inordinate growth of the human population is to me a source of fear, real fear in fact. How is it to be controlled? Is controlling population growth morally right, or at least ethically acceptable? Can technology continue its expected path of increased productivity? Is Chemistry, especially organic chemistry, able to contribute to the finding of new solutions? Will medicine continue to avail against the immeasurable tide of human sickness? Or will children continue to starve in the streets of our cities, or in lonely villages rife with poverty? How will the twenty-first century administrators (perhaps you and I) cope with the added burden of horrendous human numbers?

I CLAIM TO BE NO ETHICIST SUPREME, NO SCIENTIST ON THE BRINK OF AN ETERNAL DISCOVERY, NOT EVEN a good Christian. I know only that as a human I must care about my future, yours, the future of the earth's still unborn babies. True, education has greatly advanced to our benefit. But did you ever realize that 'exclusivism' is forcing the unfortunate out, and even the fortunate few fear dwindling resources (and really fortunes)? Mankind can no longer afford to hope in sempiternal progress. If something is not done quickly we as humans could be ringing in the twenty-first century with 11 billion plus people and nowhere to go, no more fertile grounds, no more water — just humans, helpless humans, the victims of nature's tragedy.

