

# EARTH

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1997/98



environmental  
impact = population × affluence × technology

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# Around The Campfire

## Progressive Cornucopianism

by Dave Foreman

The upcoming Sierra Club ballot may not have the aroma of a Klan rally, with burning crosses and white hoods. In fact it's something much more sinister and dangerous... —Alexander Cockburn<sup>1</sup>

...the Sierra Club had taken over the country and had decreed that henceforth only its native-born members would be allowed to remain....  
When one man, chased across Toulumne Meadows, cried that he was more important than a snail darter, the two Sierra Club Envirocops who arrested him only smiled at the poor man's delusion and threw him into a truck with the others.... —Al Martinez<sup>2</sup>

**L**ordgawda'mighty. What's going on in the Sierra Club? Has David Duke been elected its new president? Has the Sierra Club outings program launched Palmer-style raids to round up anyone without Daughters-of-the-American-Revolution credentials and deport 'em?

Well, not quite.

This winter Sierra Club members will be asked to vote on a measure that reads:

*Shall the Sierra Club reverse its decision adopted 2/24/96 to "take no position on immigration levels or on policies governing immigration into the United States"; and adopt a comprehensive population policy for the United States that continues to advocate an end to US population growth at the earliest possible time through reduction in natural increase (births minus deaths), but now also through reduction in net immigration (immigration minus emigration)?"*

This milquetoast little resolution is what leaves Mr. Cockburn bug-eyed and rolling on the floor, and what causes Mr. Martinez to awaken with the cold sweats.<sup>3</sup> Goodness. How, I wonder, might they froth were they to read the population policy of The Wilderness Society? It closes with:

*One-half to two-thirds of US population growth results from domestic births and longer life spans. One-third to one-half is due to immigration. To bring population levels to ecologically sustainable levels, both birth rates and immigration rates need to be reduced.*

Better get back on your medicine, boys.

continued on p. 2

1 "Column Left" Los Angeles Times 10/2/97

2 "Listen to the Wind..." Los Angeles Times 10/7/97

3 What makes these breathless LA Times columnists so laughable is that the majority of the Sierra Club establishment—the executive staff, the Board of Directors, the Council of Club Leaders—strongly opposes the immigration ballot question.

## About Wild Earth and The Wildlands Project

**Wild Earth** (POB 455, Richmond, VT 05477; 802-434-4077) is a quarterly journal melding conservation biology and wildlands activism. Our efforts to strengthen the conservation movement involve the following:

- We serve as the publishing wing of The Wildlands Project.
- We provide a forum for the many effective but little-known regional wilderness groups and coalitions in North America, and serve as a networking tool for wilderness activists.
- We make the teachings of conservation biology accessible to non-scientists, that activists may employ them in defense of biodiversity.
- We expose threats to habitat and wildlife.
- We facilitate discussion on ways to end and reverse the human population explosion.
- We defend wilderness both as concept and as place.

**Wild Earth and The Wildlands Project** are closely allied but independent non-profit organizations dedicated to the restoration and protection of wilderness and biodiversity. We share a vision of an ecologically healthy North America—with adequate habitat for all native species, containing vibrant human and natural communities.

**The Wildlands Project** (1955 W. Grant Rd., Suite 148A, Tucson, AZ 85745; 520-884-0875) is the organization guiding the design of a continental wilderness recovery strategy. Through advocacy, education, scientific consultation, and cooperation with many regional groups, The Wildlands Project is drafting a blueprint for an interconnected, continental-scale system of protected wildlands linked by habitat corridors.



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Now, my purpose here is not to argue in favor of a YES vote on the Sierra Club ballot question, though I am honored to appear as a sponsor of it in the distinguished company of David Brower, Paul Ehrlich, Anne Ehrlich, and former United States Senator and father of Earth Day, Gaylord Nelson. I want to use this polarized issue, instead, to show the threat of a fervid cornucopianism from leftists and liberals that is ultimately more dangerous to efforts to stabilize population than is the cornucopianism of right-to-lifers and no-limits economists on the right. Let me first point out that while there are race-baiting extremists like Cockburn and Martinez (and worse) among the Progressive Cornucopians, there are also nice people. Mistaken, yes, but some of them are friends of mine.

Before we begin, let's define some terms. When it comes to describing political categories, the most simplistic and inaccurate model is the most common one—the single political spectrum from left to right. Political scientist Theodore Lowi offers a more sophisticated and far more accurate dresser of sock drawers by arguing that there are three independent political spectrums in American politics:

- 1) Left (Marxist) from Old Left to New Left.
- 2) Liberalism (non-socialist) from Old Liberalism (Libertarianism) to New Liberalism (New Deal-type Regulatory State).
- 3) Conservatism (Transcendent Order) from Patrician (secular) to Populist (religious).<sup>4</sup>

What I am concerned with here is a cornucopianism combining both the Left and New Liberalism. I'm going to call it Progressive Cornucopianism, though I'd prefer to call it Politically-correct Cornucopianism. The latter term is a little snotty, so, in the interest of being a kinder and gentler Dave Foreman, I'll use the former. Progressive Cornucopianism is based on political correctness, nonetheless, which I define by the following traits:

- 1) Multiculturalism—persons are not defined as individuals, but by their group identity; all cultures, except for those based on Western Civilization, are equally valid and good.
- 2) Victimization—the world is divided into an oppressor class (white, heterosexual males and corporate executives) and the oppressed class (everyone else).
- 3) Progressive Humanism—people (as a mass and as individuals) are good and ultimately perfectible (if individuals do bad things, it's because they've been oppressed at some point); institutions and corporations are bad.
- 4) Guilt—upper-middle-class, educated whites should feel guilty for their privileged status and for the injustices done to the oppressed classes over the last 500 or so years.
- 5) Social Justice—at its extreme, resources should be equitably redistributed (from each according to his means, to each according to his needs).

<sup>4</sup> See Theodore Lowi's *The End of the Republican Era* for a thoughtful discussion of political categories.

## Around the Campfire

Libertarian Cornucopianism argues that resources are infinite and that everyone would have plenty if only government would quit stifling entrepreneurial creativity. Progressive Cornucopianism argues that there is plenty for everyone if only resources were fairly distributed and the privileged class would reduce consumption.<sup>5</sup>

Conservationists have worried about overpopulation for decades. With David Brower's sponsorship, Paul Ehrlich brought these concerns to a mass audience in the late 1960s. Even then, the Left, in the person of the "Pollution Man," Barry Commoner, argued that unfair distribution of resources was the problem, not population. (Commoner also chided defenders of wilderness and wildlife, arguing that pollution cleanup and human health were more important.) Despite Commoner's influence and despite the New Left origins of many Earth Day environmentalists, traditional conservation groups and the newer environmental groups made overpopulation a major issue. Today, over a quarter of a century later and with more than two billion additional humans on the planet, conservation and environmental groups alike shy away from speaking out on overpopulation and especially quail from discussing immigration's role in making the United States the fastest growing of any modern, industrialized nation.

This chilling effect has come from browbeating by Progressive Cornucopians. It hamstring the efforts of conservation/environmental groups to forthrightly address carrying capacity issues.

Many urban environmentalists are more concerned with pollution, social justice, and corporate accountability than they are with wilderness and Endangered species. They are *environmentalists* and not *conservationists*.<sup>6</sup> They are people-oriented and believe that social justice and human rights are fundamental to the mission of the Sierra Club and other conservation/environmental groups. Other social justice activists have joined the Sierra Club because the Club is an effective political force and they want the Club to work on their issues. For example, in the 1996 election the California Sierra Club formally supported an initiative to raise the minimum wage and opposed the initiative to end affirmative action. Now the relative merits of these issues are irrelevant. The question for conservationists is—should the Sierra Club and other

conservation groups be taking positions on these and other issues that are peripheral to protecting Nature?

Instead of trying to do something about overpopulation, Progressive Cornucopians argue instead that overconsumption is the problem and we should practice "voluntary simplicity." Some Sierrans are even pushing a ballot initiative to make support for a vegetarian diet official Club policy. (By the way, the extremist animal rights group, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), has essentially taken over the New York City group of the Sierra Club and heavily influences some California chapters. They are raising Cain about the Sierra Club's outreach to hunting and fishing groups.)

Some Sierra Club members see conservation/environmental groups as part of some sort of "progressive coalition." They fear that if the Club supports limiting immigration, Democratic members of Congress from Los Angeles will no longer support the Sierra Club on pollution control, wilderness, and Endangered species issues. Indeed, a high official in the Club told me that some of these politicians had pretty much threatened the Club about this. Should a conservation group ever tolerate such linkage demands from a politician? Well, I may be old-fashioned, but my answer is No—Hell No. By the way, this identification with liberal Democratic Party politicians and with "progressivism" is one of the reasons conservation and environmental groups find it so hard to find supporters in the Republican Party.

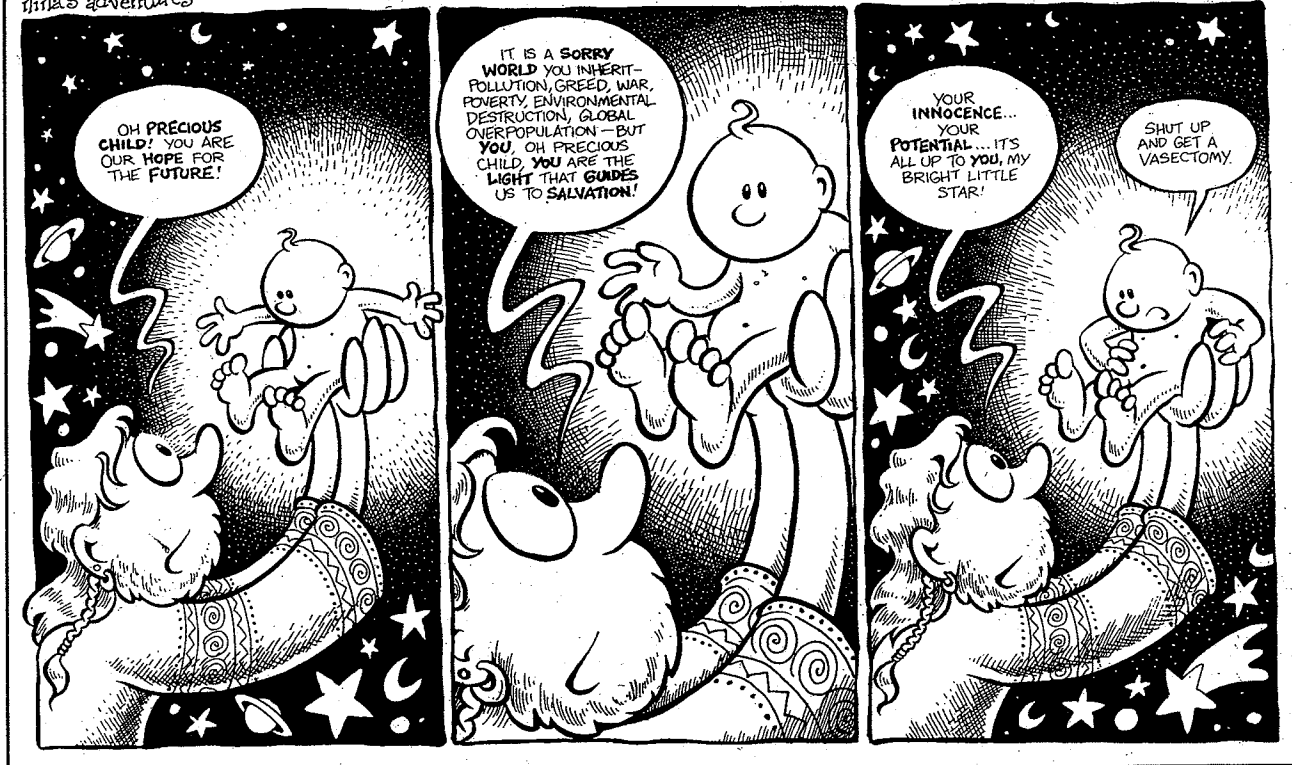
We're told that if the Sierra Club takes a position in favor of reducing immigration, we will alienate urban ethnic groups who are "the Sierra Club's best source for coalition building and future members."<sup>7</sup> Never mind that public opinion polls show strong support among Blacks and Hispanics for limiting immigration. For example, a recent poll in Texas shows "some 59% of Hispanic-Americans supported curbs on immigration." Even in the politically-correct bastion of California, "47% favored; while 39% opposed, immigration cut-backs." And—look here, "lower-income Hispanics have the greatest anti-immigrant sentiment...."<sup>8</sup> Yes, Virginia, there is a political difference between real people and their ambitious self-appointed leaders. And, yes,

5 Please note that I am not describing all liberals or progressives here. I am describing political correctness. And, of course, I understand that resources are not fairly distributed and that many people need to reduce consumption. Nonetheless, it is the sheer mass of humans that are wasting the natural world. Even without the tony lifestyles of Americans, Europeans, and Japanese, six billion and more humans will squeeze the wildness and integrity out of Nature, and will cause the eventual extinction of large mammals and many other species.

6 I apologize for generalizing. It is the only way to write without larding each sentence with a flock of qualifiers. There are many people who consider themselves liberals or who live in urban areas or who are concerned about human rights and social justice who do not run away from the hard issues of overpopulation and who are not trapped in political correctness. My fellow signers of the immigration ballot question—the Ehrlichs, Brower, and Nelson—are good examples. Alan Kuper, the sparkplug behind the Sierra Club ballot issue, is another fine example. There are also dedicated conservationists who disagree with me on this issue.

7 I'm taking these quotes from an August 26, 1996, document put out by Sierrans opposed to the immigration ballot question.

8 *Investor's Business Daily*, September 9, 1997.



Democrat politicians can be irresponsible demagogues as much as can Republicans.

Trying to turn the debate about limiting immigration into a question of immigrant bashing and racism is irresponsible, but effective. One group, the Urban Habitat Campaign, which unfortunately seems to be linked to Earth Island Institute, ran a hate-laced, distorted ad in the Sierra Club's San Francisco newsletter, the *Yodeler*, accusing Population-Environment Balance of using "apocalyptic 'facts' about global population growth which aim to fuel white fears of a brown planet." Maria Sepulveda, executive director of Population-Environment Balance, calmly responded that, given she was the daughter of Chilean immigrants, this was not their concern.

For the past year, I've used "Around the Campfire" to look at the psychology behind the human War on Nature. Abiologism (disbelief that biology applies to humans), Immaturity (irresponsibility and a rejection of limits), and Fear of Nature (running the gamut from not caring about other species to loathing of the wild) are behind the historic looting of the American wilderness and behind the anti-conservation movement today. But, frankly, abiologism, immaturity, and fear of the wild are also characteristics of Progressive Cornucopianism.<sup>9</sup> Fear and loathing of the wild? Take a gander at

Martinez's crack about snail darters. It's worthy of Helen Chenoweth. (Martinez is a Sierra Club member, by the way.) As an example of how Progressive Cornucopians are driven by abiologism and immaturity, the Sierra Club immigration ballot opponents argue that "overconsumption and unsustainable business practices, not population numbers," caused the extinction of the Passenger Pigeon. Actually, historians have shown that rapidly growing urban centers fueled the pigeon slaughter (some wholesalers in New York City were marketing 15,000 pigeons a day by the 1850s—this was cheap food for the urban working class). Overpopulation is not merely living cheek by jowl; it is when a population of any species exceeds the carrying capacity of its habitat. (Yes, we are animals and, yes, we have habitats and, yes, we are subject to carrying capacity.) Left, right, liberal, libertarian cornucopians all discard the notion of carrying capacity for humans. Humans are special, they all agree.

I hope this brief and incomplete discussion of the Sierra Club ballot issue helps to illustrate the danger of Progressive Cornucopianism. We, who recognize that human population growth is the greatest threat to the ecological health and integrity of Earth—and therefore to social justice and human rights as well, need to turn more and more of our energy to confronting head-on these Progressive Cornucopians.<sup>10</sup> It is unpleasant to do

<sup>9</sup> See David Ehrenfeld's masterwork, *The Arrogance of Humanism*, to understand how secular progressives stand above Nature.

# Wild Earth Update



so, since there are substantive issues of social justice, human rights, and racism that need attention.

In closing, let me acknowledge that there are plenty of racists howling about immigration, and that I regret that many non-racist advocates of limiting immigration have based their campaigns on social and economic arguments, instead of on ecological carrying-capacity arguments. There is nothing anti-immigrant inherent in the Sierra Club's ballot proposition. Rather, it is based on the simple recognition that:

- burgeoning numbers of people are degrading the natural world;
- Americans as individuals and collectively may have the greatest impact on Nature of any people;
- immigration is the major source of population growth in the United States;
- the world cannot afford more Americans.

I am sad that the race-baiting hooligans of the Left (many of whom are opportunists trying to build a political base by peddling fear of racist oppression among immigrant communities) make it nearly impossible to have an intelligent discussion about immigration or overpopulation. We need a discussion that is not racist or immigrant-bashing or emotional, but one that is honorable, decent, and fair—one that is based on science and the profound negative effects of a growing human population on our life-support system and on the wild things and wild places that make up our only home.

—Dave Foreman

Boulder Mountain, Utah

*Note: I'll be looking more closely at Progressive Cornucopianism in my forthcoming book, The War on Nature.*

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10 Many fine people in the Sierra Club oppose taking a stand on immigration because it is such a divisive issue for the Club. I fully respect their position and do not mean to imply any criticism of them. These people include several dear friends and otherwise allies of mine. Some of the people who believe immigration and even overpopulation are not a problem are decent, sincere individuals—I am criticizing their views and not them as persons. There are also racist demagogues, whining bleeding-hearts, and people who hate the natural world in the pro-immigration movement. If I've offended them, well, shucks...

“Change is good,” former co-worker Erin O'Donnell-Gilbert would reassure us as the time of her departure became imminent. Her attitude may be a healthy one to adopt whenever confronted with inevitable loss. But some changes that are perceived by the many as inevitable need to be tenaciously fought by the few, as is the case with human-caused habitat loss.

The reasons why our plant and animal compatriots face a decreased land base each year are many and varied, but human population growth is certainly one of them. Five hundred species are already known to be extinct in the US, with at least 9,000 others at risk of vanishing. Extinction may be forever, but habitat loss need not be. It remains possible that land-use management decisions could change over time to consider the needs of species beyond the one that now dominates the landscape, and that the human population could stop growing (or even decline) if more of us chose to work actively toward solutions to the problem of human population growth.

Founders Dave Foreman and John Davis recognized from its inception that *Wild Earth* could contribute to this end. “Population Problems” was thus established as a regular department with the journal's first issue in 1991; since then, *Wild Earth* has published over 30 articles that specifically address overpopulation [see *WE Population Problems Index*, p. 104]. This long-standing commitment to population coverage continues in this special theme issue, funded in part by the Weeden Foundation and dedicated readers Fred Stanback and Richard Grossman; with it, we seek to reinvigorate and broaden the population debate in hopes that the human footprint across the continent might decrease to the point where North America's native flora and fauna once again flourish.

—Monique Miller

