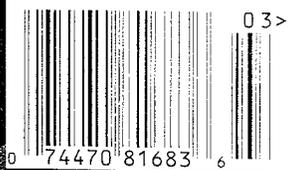


WILD EARTH

**The Journal of the
Wildlands Project**

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Paul Hawken
Lyanda Lynn Haupt
Mike Fay
John Elder
Gary Paul Nabhan

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WILDLANDS PROJECT



reconnect restore rewild

WE ARE AMBITIOUS. We live for the day when grizzlies in Chihuahua have an unbroken connection to grizzlies in Alaska; when wolf populations are restored from Mexico to the Yukon to Maine; when vast forests and flowing prairies again thrive and support their full range of native plants and animals; when humans dwell on the land with respect, humility, and affection.

Toward this end, the Wildlands Project is working to restore and protect the natural heritage of North America. Through advocacy, education, scientific consultation, and cooperation with many partners, we are designing and helping create systems of interconnected wilderness areas that can sustain the diversity of life.

Wild Earth—the quarterly publication of the Wildlands Project—inspires effective action for wild Nature by communicating the latest thinking in conservation science, philosophy, policy, and activism, and serves as a forum for diverse views within the conservation movement.

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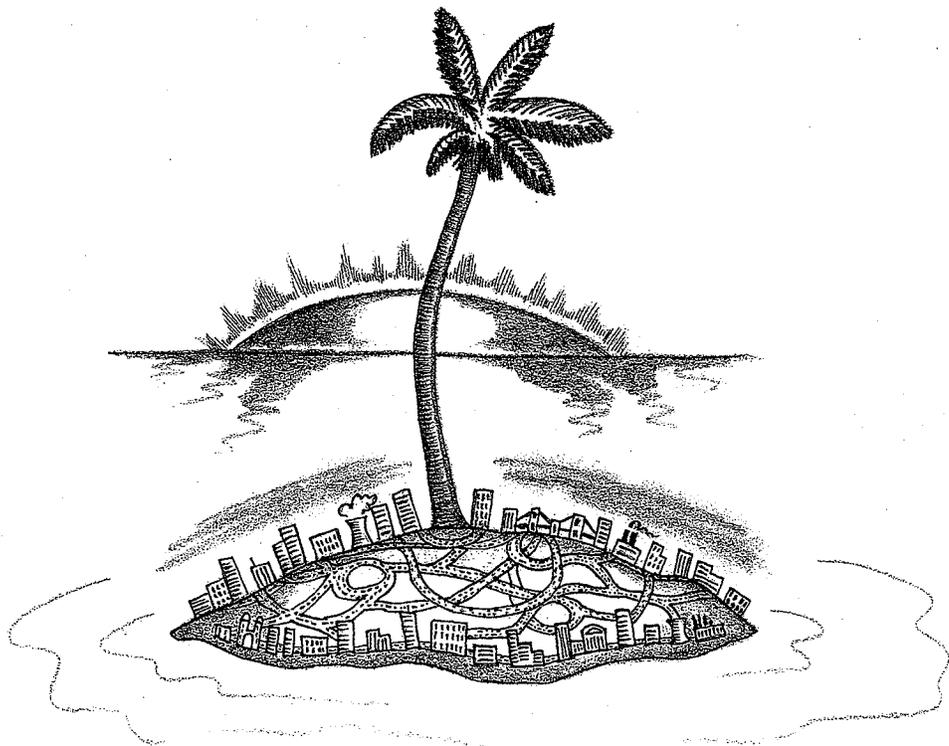
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"Oak, Cherry, Solidago" (detail), oil on gessoed paper by Heather Lenz, ©1998



Don't Worry, Be Happy

ONE OF THE MOST remote and supposedly pristine islands in the South Pacific is Henderson Island. Europeans first stumbled upon it in 1606. No people lived there. It was believed that no humans had ever lived there. Henderson's lack of human settlement was recently called into question when bird paleontologists Storrs Olson and David Steadman found the bones of three extinct species of pigeons and three extinct species of seabirds on it. Only after the extinct birds were uncovered were Polynesian archaeological sites found. Clearly people had lived on Henderson, destroyed their resource

base, and died out or left. Jared Diamond writes, "Given the widespread evidence for overexploitation of wild animals by early Polynesians, not only Henderson but the other mystery islands as well may represent the graveyards of human populations that ruined their own resource base."¹

The question we face today is whether we can avoid turning Earth into Henderson Island.

Remember Malthus's argument: "Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio."

William Catton, author of *Overshoot*, the wisest, most enlighten-

ing discussion of overpopulation I have read, explains:

Throughout the essay Malthus was referring to human population, and by subsistence he meant food...these conceptions were unduly narrow. But the really basic Malthusian principle is so important that it needs to be restated in the more accurate vocabulary of modern ecology. It states a relationship of inequality between two variables: *The cumulative biotic potential of the human species exceeds the carrying capacity of its habitat.*

This is an absolutely fundamental point for understanding the modern predicament. By *biotic potential*, Catton means how many children a couple

could theoretically produce, and *cumulative biotic potential* means "the total number of people that could result after a series of generations if every generation fully exercised its reproductive power." *Carrying capacity of its habitat* "is simply the maximum number of living individuals the available resources can indefinitely support." In other words, humans always have the potential to produce more humans than any area, including the entire world, can support.²

Simple. There are limits. We can overshoot them. This is a basic biological fact.

Opposed to this reality is the dominant faith of the world—*humanism*. In *The Arrogance of Humanism*, David Ehrenfeld warns that humanism is based on a group of assumptions, which "cut across political lines":

All problems are soluble by people.

Many problems are soluble by technology.

Those problems that are not soluble by technology, or by technology alone, have solutions in the social world (of politics, economics, etc.).

When the chips are down, we will apply ourselves and work together for a solution before it is too late.

Some resources are infinite; all finite or limited resources have substitutes.

Human civilization will survive.³

Catton warns that "believing crash can't happen to us is one reason it will. The principles of ecology apply to all living things.... Whatever the species, irruptions that overshoot carrying capacity lead inexorably to die-offs."⁴ When we overshoot the carrying capacity of our habitat, whether it is Henderson Island or the entire world, we damage the future

productivity of our habitat, causing its future carrying capacity to be less than it was originally.⁵

Ehrenfeld explains the danger along the path laid out by the Panglossian cornucopians: "The overwhelming trend of the humanist-dominated present is towards more ruined soils, more deserts, more children with anomie, more shattered, violent societies, more weapons whose horror surpasses imagination, more techniques of autocratic suppression, and more mechanisms for isolating human beings from one another."⁶

The cornucopians dismiss such views as a social pathology of pessimism. Ehrenfeld responds, "The motive for their constant insistence on being optimistic and 'positive' is simply the converse of this; optimism is necessary for those who are attempting the impossible; they could not continue to function without it."⁷ Veteran science journalist Eugene Linden warns, "Any vision of the future that either expects or demands a new human, a higher consciousness,

Former Colorado governor Richard Lamm simply asks, "Given present realities, why do we want our children to face an America of 400 million people?"¹⁰

It is widely believed that "developed" nations are what "undeveloped" nations will soon become. Catton points out that just the opposite is more likely.¹¹ The writings of Robert D. Kaplan, who travels to the most dangerous and godforsaken places in the world, clearly show that many undeveloped countries are becoming even more undeveloped and poor, and suggest that developed countries, including the United States, may be degenerating as well.¹² Disturbing as that view may be, I think Kaplan has a far more accurate picture of the future than do the rosy-cheeked, bright-eyed economists worshipping at the tomb of Julian Simon.

At a recent conference, Kaplan said, "All the countries with violent upheavals in the 1980s and '90s were the ones that showed the highest growth rate in the '60s! Every country where bloody internecine civil

Humans always have the potential to produce more humans than any area, including the entire world, can support. Simple. There are limits. We can overshoot them.

or some other transformation of human nature should be automatically suspect."⁸ Linden also writes that "widespread optimism has always been a good indicator that disaster is around the corner."⁹ His recent book, *The Future in Plain Sight*, is a sober, credible look at possible tomorrows without assuming miracles.

wars have occurred in recent years had a huge population preceding the conflict."¹³ Journalist Georgie Ann Geyer checked some figures to see if Kaplan was right. For the following countries, which are plagued by social and ecological problems, the first figure is 1950 population, the second is for 1998:

Rwanda: 2.1 million, 8 million
 Haiti: 3.3 million, 7.5 million
 Algeria: 8.8 million, 30.2 million
 Afghanistan: 9 million, 24.8 million
 Zaire (Congo): 12.2 million, 49 million
 El Salvador: 2 million, 5.8 million
 Ethiopia: 18.4 million, 58.4 million

For example, Rwandan women were on average each producing eight children before the horrible Hutu-Tutsi genocide. Geyer says she was "flabbergasted" after reviewing the numbers.¹⁴

After listing a few of the wars and internal conflicts plaguing the world at the close of the twentieth century, anthropologist Marvin Harris wrote, "As one of these conflicts ends, another begins: Nothing warrants the hope that the rate of carnage is about to slacken."¹⁵ According to Harris, "During the 1980s, some of the worst famines in history afflicted large parts of Africa and South Asia, under the very noses of the United Nations and other international agencies. In absolute numbers, more illiterate, impoverished, and chronically malnourished people live in the world at the end of the twentieth century than at the beginning."¹⁶

Stanford law professor John Donohue and University of Chicago economist Steven Levitt made another linkage between social anarchy and explosive birth rates when they inquired into the baffling drop in the crime rate in the United States. They believe that half of the crime rate drop is because of the legalization of abortion. Unwanted children brought up (or effectively abandoned) in a poor underclass where criminality, drug use, and joblessness are rife find it very easy to become criminals. As liberal columnist Ellen Goodman put it, "After *Roe*, to put it bluntly, some unwanted fetuses at risk of becoming potential criminals were aborted."¹⁷ This may be politically incorrect, but it makes perfect sense. Wanted children have a better shot for a good life than do unwanted children. Overpopulation in hopeless, degenerate communities leads to a further breakdown of civilized behavior.

Can we work it out rationally? Are we in charge? Marvin Harris warned in 1977 that "the major transformations of human social life have hitherto never corresponded to the consciously held objectives of the

historical participants."¹⁸ He later wrote that

the major processes of cultural evolution do not bear witness to our kind's ability to exert conscious, intelligent control over our species' destiny...all the major steps in cultural evolution took place in the absence of anyone's conscious understanding of what was happening.... Each great transformation in human history and prehistory occurred as a consequence of conscious decisions, but the conscious decisions were not about great transformations.¹⁹

In other words, "nobody is at the wheel, because there isn't any wheel, nor can there be," as Ehrenfeld explains.²⁰

Those concerned about the future instead of immediate gratification should ponder David Ehrenfeld's warning:

In this Age of Ironies this must be the greatest irony of all: humanism, which proclaims and celebrates the critical intelligence of humanity, has in the last analysis failed to invoke it where it is needed most, to test humanism's own faith by appraising the success of our interactions with our environment.²¹

~ Dave Foreman

Loco Mountains, Gila Wilderness Area

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The opinions expressed in Campfire are my own, and do not necessarily reflect official policy of the Wildlands Project. —DF

