

Silence That Kills

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I hope that a sufficient number of us are now aware that the lush and comfortable world that once we knew is departing forever. But I fear that we still dream on and, rather than waking, we weave the sound of the alarm clock into our dreams.

James Lovelock 2009
The Vanishing Face of Gaia, p. 29

Robert McNamara, who was US President Lyndon Johnson's intellectual point man for the Vietnam War, sent thousands upon thousands of mostly young people to their deaths. "Long after the horror of Vietnam was over, McNamara would concede, in remarks that were like salt in the still festering wounds of loved ones of those who had died, that he had been 'wrong, terribly wrong' about the war. . . McNamara, it turns out, had realized early on that Vietnam was a lost cause, but he kept that crucial information close to his chest, like a gambler trying to bluff his way through a bad hand, as America continued to send tens of thousands to their doom. How in God's name did he ever look at himself in a mirror? . . . More than 58,000 Americans died in Vietnam and some 2 million to 3 million Vietnamese" (Herbert 2009).

One of the people drafted (Herbert 2009) for the war has stated: "I remember getting my draft notice in the mid-1960s as Johnson's military buildup for the war was in full swing. I'm not sure what I expected. Probably that the other recruits would be a tough bunch, that they would all look like John Wayne. I was staggered on the first day of basic training at Fort Dix, N.J., to be part of a motley gathering of mostly scared and skinny kids who looked like the guys I'd gone to high school with. Who looked, basically, pun intended, like me."

McNamara must be given recognition for admitting that he had been "wrong, terribly wrong." Apparently he anguished over his decisions until his death at age 93. McNamara remained silent in what turned out to be a catastrophe, but all humankind has remained silent about an even greater problem – the overpopulation of Earth!

Overpopulation and Food Production

The world's population reached 1 billion in 1804, 2 billion in 1927 (123 years later), 3 billion in 1960 (33 years later), 4 billion in 1974 (14 years later), 5 billion in 1987 (13 years later), and 6 billion in 1999 (12 years later) – the world's population may reach 7 billion in 2013 (14 years later), 8 billion in 2028 (15 years later), and 9 billion in 2054 (26 years later) (United Nations Population Division). In the short term, these figures represent 75 million more mouths to feed each year or 1.5 million every week or 214,000 every day. Feeding this many mouths will not be possible for the indefinite future, especially when global climate change may markedly reduce agricultural productivity (World Agricultural Supply and Demand Estimates 2009).

Brown (2009) provides the encouraging news "that food aid shipments to China would stop at the end of the year. . . . The key to China's success was the economic reforms in 1978 that dismantled its system of agricultural collectives, known as production teams, and replaced them with family farms." However, Brown (2009) cautions that, "while hunger has been disappearing in China, it has been spreading throughout most of the developing world, notably sub-Saharan Africa and parts of the Indian subcontinent. . . . Dealing with this problem requires addressing the long-term trends leading to growth in demand for food outpacing growth in supply. . . . Despite local advances, the overall loss of momentum in expanding food production is unmistakable."

Food production also depends on water availability. In Nassapur, Uganda, rainmakers are convinced that Ekipe, the rain god, is angry because rainmaking rituals no longer appear effective: "We don't know why the god is no longer answering our requests . . . For years, we used to ask the god for rain and we got it in abundance, but we have had four years without enough rain now, and this is very strange" (Nyakairu 2009).

Another heartbreaking tale comes from Kenya, Africa, which is experiencing a severe drought. Kenya's population currently is 38 million and is projected to be 65 million by 2050 (Wachira 2009). "Environmentalists have raised the red flag over the continued degradation of the Mt. Marsabit ecosystem blaming it for the prolonged drought and scarcity of water being experienced in this vast arid region. . . . Already, domestic animals and wild animals have started dying in worrying numbers due to lack of pasture and water. With the destruction of the main forest cover in the region, there is now very little underground water to sustain the livestock. The area . . . has no permanent river and the residents rely solely on boreholes and wells" (Wachira 2009). The temporary solution for the pastoralists is to migrate to Ethiopia, which only exacerbates Ethiopia's problems.

Optimum Number of People

Population stabilization is rarely discussed and the silence continues. However, only two alternatives are available: (1) permit the population to grow unchecked until it exceeds the bare subsistence level and Mother Nature culls the population by means of disease, starvation, and death or (2) estimate optimum population size based on Earth's ability to regenerate resources (which will not be constant). Any means of population control – abstinence, delayed marriage, birth control, the "morning after" pill, abortion – are highly controversial and may be perceived as encroaching on individual freedom. In the United States, medical doctors who perform abortions have been shot and killed. An even more intrusive method of population stabilization is to sterilize women (or men) after replacement rate births of children to them have occurred. Of course, less stressful in the short term is to do nothing, but food shortages could easily cause millions, even billions, of deaths. Surplus (in excess of carrying capacity) persons will die even if we refuse to discuss overpopulation.

Of course, the optimal population size will continually decrease if the resources base remains constant and a significant number of people always want more. In short, desires for continual increases in material possessions or any other resource-consuming desires are not sustainable. People afflicted with affluenza are on one end of the spectrum and people living in abject poverty are the other extreme. "So what do you do if you live in the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, and the price of the primary carbohydrate – "Miami rice" from the U.S. – doubles? Mostly, you go hungry and watch your children do the same" (Bourne 2008).

The Black Death

The Black Death was a horrible disease that afflicted Europe from 1328-1351. Nearly one-third of the 200 million people in Europe died in that period. However, the plague did have positive benefits. It dramatically increased resources per capita and also caused people to rethink their value systems. The Renaissance (literally *rebirth*) occurred from 1300-1600 and represented exciting new developments in art, literature, theater, music, poetry, and so on. How tragic if another pandemic is necessary to launch a 21st century renaissance of new development and lifestyle changes!

The Population Bomb Revisited

Just after *The Population Bomb* was published (Ehrlich 1968), I invited Paul Ehrlich to present a visiting scholar lecture on the book at Virginia Tech. The book has been both praised and vilified. Population was not talked about much in those days because some economists had persuaded people that growth had no limits. However, the students sensed that overpopulation of the planet affected their future and responded intelligently to the lecture.

From the five highly interactive global crises – (1) climate change, (2) overpopulation, (3) ocean acidification, (4) ecological overshoot, (5) toxicants, including endocrine disruptors – climate change seems to be the only issue being discussed, even though greenhouse gas emissions have seen no significant reduction. Population control is definitely taboo for discussion, although the news media seem to have no trouble discussing various politicians' sex life (e.g., Collins 2009).

Conclusions

"Four decades of largely ignored population growth and related issues – especially patterns of rising consumption and their environmental effects – since then [the publication of *The Population Bomb*] make collapse now seem ever more likely and possibly sooner than even many pessimists think" (Ehrlich and Ehrlich

2009). Another 40 years of silence on global population is unthinkable. Human numbers are rising exponentially, a crash is more likely, and resources per capita will be even less than they are today.

Humankind is heading in silence into an increasingly dangerous future on all the global problems except climate change, where discussion is taking place but with little action. Standing by, as usual, is Mother Nature (i.e., natural law) with ready solutions to exceeding carrying capacity (i.e., overpopulation) – none of her solutions are attractive to most persons presently alive. Mother Nature always reacts when natural laws are broken – the only questions are “when” and “how.” Lovelock (2007) goes to the heart of the global crisis: “We have grown in numbers to the point where our presence is perceptibly disabling the planet like a disease.” Ehrlich and Ehrlich (2009) state the alternatives bluntly: “The essential point made about population growth is as valid today as it was in 1968: ‘Basically, there are only two kinds of solutions to the population problem. One is a ‘birthrate solution,’ in which we find ways to lower the birthrate. The other is a ‘death rate solution,’ in which ways to raise the death rate – war, famine, pestilence – find us” (Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1968, p. 34). Anyone who prefers silence is effectively casting a vote for the ‘death rate solution.’

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