

## Contextual Disparities in Pro-life Positions



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**Abstract :** Human thought processes are contextual, so humans assimilate new information and ideas best when they can be associated with familiar contexts. Human population size and Earth's carrying capacity for humans are rarely discussed, although much information is available on the Internet. On the few occasions when discussions do occur, they are usually in a religious/ideological context. A major component of these discussions, as related to humans, is the right of a woman to determine events in her body. The pro-life position is that, from the moment of conception, the individual has the right to life. In the United States, heated discussions continue on abortion, individual choice vs federally mandated restrictions, and "rights" of medical providers to refuse to provide birth control information (or even discuss it) if it conflicts with their religious beliefs. However, absent from all these arguments is how the daily increase of 215,000 people (births minus deaths) will be fed and provided with potable water, medical care, and adequate housing on a finite planet. With continued exponential human population growth, the number of people living in misery will increase significantly. The usual response to this evidence is that someone (usually a deity) or something (usually technology) will provide the needed resources. However, with nearly half the planet's population living at barely adequate subsistence levels, this response is clearly inadequate.

**Key words :** Pro-life, Carrying capacity, Global heating, Exponential growth, Food production.

*Extremism appears to lead to clear-cut decisions, whereas moderation embarrasses us by emphasizing problems yet to be solved.*

**Garrett Hardin**

*A finite world can support only a finite population; therefore, population growth must eventually equal zero.*

**Garrett Hardin**

*But does God give a prize for the maximum number of people? Such a God cannot be Einstein's God.*

**Garrett Hardin**

*Economists (and others) who are satisfied with nature-free equations develop a dangerous hubris about the potency of our species.*

**Garrett Hardin**

### Issue Statement

- (1) More people are now living in misery than were on Earth just a little over a century ago.
- (2) Earth is overcrowded with humans who are using far more resources than nature can regenerate (ecological overshoot).
- (3) If humankind does not stabilize its population within Earth's carrying capacity, nature will do so with death, disease, and starvation – that is, the human population will be stabilized within Earth's carrying capacity, the question is: will humans do it or let nature do it?
- (4) The future belongs to those societies that nurture science, promote

knowledge, and use a value system congruent with natural law to protect the biosphere. How can this approach be implemented in time to prevent catastrophes?

### **The Watchdogs (Scientists) are Barking but Few People are Listening**

Thomas Malthus provided the first warning on the dangers of overpopulation in 1798. Heated discussions on the issue of overpopulation have ensued, often by people who have neglected to read Malthus' treatise. Four decades ago, Ehrlich (1968) published a widely read volume on population, and Garrett Hardin has devoted his entire professional career to "lifeboat ethics" (i.e., how does humankind stay within Earth's carrying capacity?). Both of these scientists emphasized that Earth's carrying capacity for humans is not infinite; in addition, persuasive evidence shows that global heating is reducing carrying capacity (e.g., less food). Arguably, no political issue (i.e., global heating) so strongly dependent upon science has had so many "watchdogs" barking for such a long time (Fourier and Tydall about 1855 and Svanta Arhennius around 1896). At present, many agencies are emphasizing areas that affect Earth's carrying capacity for humans. In terms of numbers, few scientific efforts can match the sizable, multiple publications of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), which has involved thousands of scientists for a decade. In addition, the various National Academies of Science and their counterparts in other countries (e.g., Royal Society), which represent the best in world science, agree on the basic concepts of climate change (especially that anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions are an important component), as does the preponderance of scientific evidence.

### **Carrying Capacity**

*Carrying capacity* can be defined as the largest number of individuals of a particular species that can survive *over long periods of time* in a *given* environment. The level of the carrying capacity depends on the effect of the limiting factors ([http://www.biology-online.org/dictionary/Carrying\\_capacity](http://www.biology-online.org/dictionary/Carrying_capacity)). Hardin (<http://www.garretthardinsociety.org>) predicted that the 21<sup>st</sup> century will be a defining moment for *Homo sapiens* because either natural law or human society will stop exponential population growth. *Homo sapiens* probably will not be able to shift from *r* to *K* behavior (Pianka, 1970) — MacArthur and Wilson (1967) used the terms *r selection* (with no significant limit to a particular resource, natural selection favors productivity) and *K selection* (if a resource is limiting, natural selection favors efficient use of resources). Continuing to populate the planet was applicable when Earth was sparsely settled by humankind but is not germane for the current, overcrowded planet.

### **Developing a Sense of Community between Scientists and Non-scientists**

Considering specifics about a sustainable world (e.g., reducing human population to fit Earth's carrying capacity or severely limiting anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions) is like running full tilt into a stone wall. Most people have little or no contact with natural systems and, consequently, no context in which to incorporate these new thoughts. In short, carrying capacity is strongly linked to limits to growth and is an alien concept to most economists, politicians, and the general public.

Part of the problem is described by Deresiewicz (2008): "An iron law of American life decrees that the provinces of thought be limited in the collective consciousness to a single representative. Like a poor man's Noah,

we take one of each. One physicist: Stephen Hawking. One literary theorist: Harold Bloom. One radical social critic: Noam Chomsky. Before her death, we had one intellectual, Susan Sontag, and one only.” This approach is not the way the scientific process works, which is a self-correcting system that has numerous scientists validate or invalidate both the hypothesis and the evidence upon which it is based. Most important, the tentative conclusions in science are based on the preponderance of evidence. Discussions in scientific organizations, especially ecological ones, revolve around how to communicate effectively with politicians and the public. Far less common are efforts by politicians and laypersons to understand science.

### **The End of the Golden Age of Food**

“On nearly every level, we are reaching the end of what may one day be called the “golden age” of food, a brief, near-miraculous period during which the things we ate seemed to grow only more plentiful, more secure, more nutritious, and simply *better* with each passing year” (Roberts, 2008, p. xii). “The food economy is hardly the only system to have encountered its limits. All sectors – from energy to housing to automotive – are now coming to grips with various constraints and external costs, and many of the risks the food system now faces, such as declining supplies of energy and the problems of cheap labor, are simply extensions of risks now at play within the larger economic system” (Roberts, 2008, p. xx).

Years ago, Hardin (1993, p. 3) remarked: “Common sense tells us that the per capita share of environmental riches must decrease as population numbers increase, and waste disposal necessarily becomes an even greater problem.” In early 2009, humankind faces five major and interactive crises simultaneously: overpopulation, financial downturn (e.g., Jolly, 2009), energy availability, global climate

change, and food scarcity. One major problem to any solutions of these crises is that many people do not believe that humans are contributing to climate change and that overpopulation is not a major problem. Discussion on climate change has greatly increased, but is far from universal; discussion on exponential human population growth receives less attention. The awareness of the global financial meltdown is now acute, and the danger is that attention to this crisis will divert resources from the other crises. Few people are acutely aware of the food crisis in wealthy countries, where only a modest percentage of total income is spent on food. In countries where the short-term availability of energy at a comparatively low price has been curtailed, a crisis is occurring in food production because energy is not available to run the machinery for agriculture or to process and transport the products. Overpopulation should be a matter of global concern, but discussion of limiting human population size meets fierce resistance.

Friedman (2008) persuasively calls attention to present catastrophic environmental problems, and Freedland (2008) makes a superb point in his review of Friedman’s book: “. . . it conceivably just might goad America’s wealthiest to face the threat of climate change and do something about it.” Speth (2008, p. x) states: “How serious is the threat to the environment? Here is one measure of the problem: all we have to do to destroy the planet’s climate and biota and leave a ruined world to our children and grandchildren is to keep doing exactly what we are doing today, with no growth in the human population or the world economy.” In January 2009, the world economy is far from growing exponentially. Either humankind stabilizes the population within Earth’s carrying capacity or Mother Nature will do so with the usual measures – starvation, disease, and death. By doing

nothing, humankind is using Mother Nature as a default position.

### **Contraception and Abortion**

One way to stem population growth is through preventing and eliminating unwanted pregnancies. If contraceptives and effective educational programs on their use are readily available for fertile women, both unwanted pregnancies and number of abortions will drop dramatically. Fewer children means more resources available for each child. Engleman (2008) states that most women do not want more children, but most do want more for their children. By more, he clearly means a better life rather than more material goods. On a finite planet with finite resources, simple arithmetic can verify this conclusion. However, with an ever widening income gap between the very wealthy and the very poor, this outcome is not likely unless the population fits Earth's carrying capacity. Ecological overshoot data show that Earth's resources are being used far more rapidly than they are being regenerated. Until recently, much of the developing world wished to share the "American dream." However, in late 2008 and early 2009, many, arguably most, American citizens are not experiencing the American dream. Population growth is a key component in this experience, as is excessive consumption of material goods. Few nations have addressed these problems; none have solved them. Improved and widely used contraception, plus increased availability and knowledge of contraception, will greatly reduce the problem of overpopulation. However, humans do make mistakes, so abortion must be available as a population control measure of last resort. The alternative is more deaths and disease in an overpopulated world.

Arthur (1999) provides the following details on abortion.

(1) *Abortion is probably the world's*

*most common surgical procedure. About 46 million abortions are performed every year, 20 million of them illegal. Abortion is practiced widely by women all over the world, across all social classes, and regardless of laws against abortion. Since the beginning of recorded history, abortion has been commonly practiced by almost all societies, including ancient China, Egypt, Greece, Rome, and countless others. In fact, abortion could be called a fundamental aspect of human behaviour.*

(2) *One-third of the world's women do not have access to legal or safe abortion, and these women die at the rate of 330 deaths per 100,000 abortion procedures. In contrast, the death rate from legal abortion averages 0.7 deaths per 100,000 procedures.*

(3) *Almost 600,000 maternal deaths related to pregnancy and childbirth occur every year in the world, mostly in the developing world. 13% of these deaths are due to unsafe abortion.*

(4) *How did the world manage to arrive at this troubling state of affairs?*

*. . . It was only during the 19<sup>th</sup> century that abortion was made illegal in most parts of the world for the first time.*

(5) *In Central and South America, abortion is illegal in every country except Cuba and Guyana, but it's widely practiced by all social classes. At least four million illegal abortions take place in Latin America every year, despite its being the most devoutly Roman Catholic region in the world.*

(6) *In Chile, one in three pregnant women choose to have an abortion – that's 160,000 a year – and hundreds die.*

(7) *In Africa, very few countries allow abortion, and problems related to pregnancy*

*are the leading cause of death for women of child-bearing age, with complications from abortion consistently ranking at the top of the list.*

*(8) In Ethiopia, 55 percent of maternal mortality stems from illegal abortion.*

*(9) In the Netherlands, abortion is freely available on demand. Yet the Netherlands boasts the lowest abortion rate in the world, about 6 abortions per 1000 women per year, and the complication and death rates from abortion are miniscule.*

*(10) An important message that we can learn from Holland and other European countries is that even the most comprehensive family planning programs and widespread contraceptive use will never completely eliminate the need for abortion. Abortion is a critical backdrop to contraception, which is not 100% effective.*

*(11) Canada also boasts what I believe is the lowest mortality rate for early abortion in the entire world.*

*(12) When quality contraception is made available to people and they use it properly, rates of unplanned pregnancy and abortion tend to go down significantly. In countries where abortion is legal, the differences in abortion rates can largely be attributed to effective contraceptive use.*

On January 24, 2008, rules were repealed that restricted money from the United States for international organizations that promote or provide abortions abroad, sweeping aside a pillar of the social policy architecture of recent years (Brown, 2009). This action may significantly reduce the number of unwanted pregnancies, but is a long way from eliminating exponential population growth.

The term “pro-life” is usually used in the United States to mean anti-abortion. In short, a brief period (prenatal) in the life of one

individual of one species (*Homo sapiens*) is the primary focus. At the extreme, this view believes that a 12-year-old child who has been raped and who becomes pregnant should not have an abortion. Consequently, this view is not pro-life for the millions of children who will be born in misery and live and die in misery in an overpopulated world. At present, nearly one billion people go to bed hungry daily. Approximately two billion are inadequately nourished, lack adequate medical care, potable water, and housing. Life on Earth has survived five great extinctions and a sixth is now underway. Nature is pro-life, but nature is also profligate in loss of life of individuals. Of the many millions of fertilized eggs produced by some species of fish, few survive to maturity. Humans also destroy millions of fertilized fish eggs in the water used for cooling spent steam in electric power plants. The Jain’s of India try to avoid killing any form of life by any means, but fail to succeed because some organisms cannot be seen. Diseases take a toll on all species that are vulnerable due to starvation, dense populations, etc. Being pro-life should mean having empathy for all stages of human life and all forms of creation with which humans share the planet. This aspiration is a monumental one, but the survival of human civilization, and probably the long-term survival for the species itself, depends on it. If humankind stays within Earth’s carrying capacity, humankind will be living sustainably. If humans continue to live unsustainably, they will be stealing the future from their children, grandchildren, and their descendants!

## **Conclusions**

Lakoff (2008, p. 68) notes: “In its moral basis and its content, conservatism is centered on the politics of authority, obedience, and discipline.” He further states: “Progressives, correspondingly, have a nurturant parent model; two parents, with equal responsibilities, and no gender constraints – or one parent of either

gender. Their job is to nurture their children and raise them to be nurturers of others. Nurturance is empathy, responsibility for oneself and others, and the strength to carry out these responsibilities” (Lakoff, 2008, p. 81). To fail in this endeavor is to fail to be pro-life in the broad sense of the word.

Nurturance practiced at the global level is to live sustainably, set limits on such realities as greenhouse gas emissions and population, and explaining the basis for them. Societal self indulgence is not the path to sustainability. Living sustainably requires sacrifice and acceptance of limits based on natural law. Above all, living sustainably requires that the biospheric life support system be preserved in its present form, which has produced conditions favorable to the genus *Homo* for approximately two million years. Ideologies and beliefs of limited scope that are not congruent with natural law simply will not be sustainable.

In Friedman’s book *The World is Flat* (Friedman, 2007), he argues that the technological revolution is leveling the global economic playing field, which enables many more people around the world to compete, connect, and collaborate (Freedland, 2008). “We are all Pilgrims again. We are all sailing on the Mayflower anew. We have not been to this shore before. If we fail to recognize that, we will, indeed, become just one more endangered species. But if we rise to this challenge, and truly become the Re-generation – redefining green and rediscovering, reviving, and regenerating America – we, and the world, will not only survive but thrive in an age that is hot, flat, and crowded” (Friedman, 2007, p. 412).

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