

Let's Talk About the Elephant in the Living Room*

*This posting is a simultaneous submission for "Climate Change and You: Putting a Face on Global Warming," EcoRes Forum Online E-Conference #3, October 19-29, 2009. Further information available at www.eco-res.org.

It is harder to conceal ignorance than to acquire knowledge.

Arnold Glasgow

Overpopulation is the "elephant in the living room" – everyone sees it but no one wants to talk about it. Exponential growth on a finite planet is neither sustainable nor desirable; however, even though sustainability is the "buzz word" de jour, humankind worships growth. Most politicians would rather walk through a mine field in their bare feet than discuss population control with their constituents. One reason for their fear may be that perpetual economic growth is often linked to perpetual population growth – more consumers = more economic growth. However, the reluctance to discuss overpopulation must be more than just fear of alienating people. For example, in the United States, a several-year, heated debate ensued on immigration, but overpopulation was rarely, if ever, mentioned. Abortion clinics have been bombed and physicians who performed abortions have been shot and killed, so passions run high. A civil, objective debate must be held on a global scale NOW.

In 1950, approximately 2.5 billion people inhabited Earth; in 2009, the population is nearly 7 billion. This exponential growth simply cannot continue on a finite planet. Barnosky (2009, p. 9) remarks:

By the time babies born today are in their fifties, even the best-case scenario predicts that more greenhouse gases will be in the air than has been the case in three million years – if we go on our merry way without any mitigation efforts. In just the years since 1950, we have approximately doubled the amount of greenhouse gases in our atmosphere. That was on top of the doubling that had already taken place between the start of the industrial revolution, say around 1700, and 1950.

However, species in ancient time frames often experienced a comparatively slowly changing environment that allowed more opportunity for relocation and/or adaptation. At present, a hot Earth is probably here for a long time, especially if human population expansion continues. The sad aspect of the situation is that humankind flourished with the Earth it had, but humankind is probably changing much of the planet irreversibly.

Earth's human population has more than doubled in my 86 years of life. Some projections place population size at 15 billion by 2100. With nearly half the present population starving or malnourished; lacking potable water; and needing better medical care, housing, and educational facilities, the 2100 estimate is probably not plausible. A major consideration is that, every time the population doubles, then food supplies, housing, school systems, medical systems, police forces, sewage treatment plants, and energy supplies must also be doubled to maintain at least the status quo after the last doubling. Of course, humans should use less polluting energy, but even this approach is beside the point – the point is that the human population simply cannot double within one human lifetime even one more time.

Earth's resources are already being used far faster than they can be regenerated. The population must be stabilized within Earth's long-term carrying capacity as rapidly and humanely as possible. To do less will condemn posterity to a life of squalor and misery.

LITERATURE CITED

Barnosky, A. D. 2009. *Heatstroke: Nature in an Age of Global Warming*. Island Press, Washington, DC.