

Regarding a sustainable world

By Olivia Redwine

Today approximately 6 billion people populate the planet. Scientists agree that if growth continues at the current rate, there will be from 9 to 13 billion people by 2050 and the earth's resources will be stressed beyond capacity. Without a radical change of course by the global community that focuses on population management and the sustainable use of resources, the world will be facing life-altering events as our biosphere implodes.

In the U. S. and in much of Europe we are experiencing the destabilizing social and economic pressures that come from lack of clean water, scarcity of food, polluted air and diminishing fossil fuel supplies. The accompanying climate changes will disrupt the last 11,000 years of agricultural stability. Family violence, global terrorism, war, chronic diseases and epidemics are becoming a part of our shared experience. Add to this the doubling of world population and unsustainable consumption of finite resources and indeed, we are all at risk. But take heart; there is hopeful progress toward creating a sustainable future for our children.

Dr. Michael Tobias is a world-renowned researcher, author and filmmaker. In 2004 he was the recipient of the Parabola Focus Award for his lifetime body of work that has included 40 books and the production of more than 100 internationally acclaimed films. His concerns for the sustainability of world resources, animal rights and the human condition touches on only a few of his multi-faceted interests and areas of expertise. In 1993 he founded The Dancing Star Foundation devoted to animal welfare, global biodiversity, conservation and environmental education. In his comprehensive book and DVD, "No Vacancy" he introduces many dedicated people directly involved in the work of

stabilizing world population. From these first hand accounts we learn of the frustrations as well as some amazing accomplishments achieved in the last thirty years.

Tobias highlights the work of Dr. Paul Ehrlich from Stanford University who was one of the first ecologists to shake our sense of global security. In 1968 his book, "The Population Bomb," exposed a tsunami of over-population heading to our shores. He focused on the devastating impact it will have on world resources and the environment. Today he advocates for ethical and sustainable practices especially in the developed world where excessive consumption of resources, accumulation of waste and dependence upon fossil fuel greatly exceeds that of lesser developed countries. He believes there is hope for our future if we accept the global responsibility for management of populations.

Dr. Malcolm Potts from the School of Public Health at UC Berkeley states in his interview for "NO Vacancy," "In my lifetime I've seen some wonderful successes. Thai couples went from six children to two in about 30 years; Koreans from six to 1.8 in that same time." He believes that if the United State's alone would allocate a larger contribution toward international family planning, it "would make the world a more secure place in a generation's time."

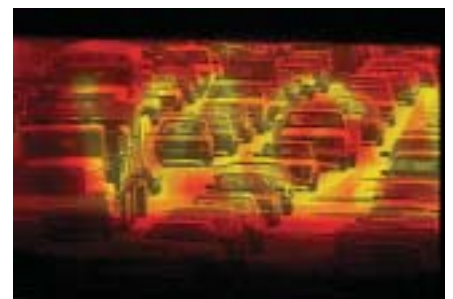
Tobias also introduces the work of Dr. Lester Brown who founded the Worldwatch Institute in 1974. It provides an annual analysis of global environmental issues and year after year it documents the massive destruction of our ecosystems. In Brown's contribution to "No Vacancy," he said it will take a cataclysmic event, like Pearl Harbor to wake the world into action. He concluded that "the wake-up call is about to be heard" and



New Delhi



Bob Gillespie and family planner/India



Los Angeles traffic



Family planning in Iran



Mexico dolls market



Indonesian infant



Indonesian child

*Photos by Michael Tobias, Ph.D.
and Dancing Star Foundation*

that when it is, things can change very rapidly. It is reassuring to hear that he believes “we can do what needs to be done.” “Already 45 countries have stabilized their population. It’s a matter of putting it all together in each country in order to build a sustainable economy. It’s entirely doable. We just have to do it.”

In 2001 Brown founded the Earth Policy Institute that is “dedicated to planning a sustainable future as well as providing a roadmap of how to get from here to there.” His book, “Plan B 2.0: Rescuing a Planet Under Stress and a Civilization in Trouble” not only defines the problems but also offers viable solutions. He assures us, “As we turn to wind, solar cells and sunlight for energy, we’ll begin to understand how intimately connected our future is with that of the earth. This will be a healthy development and lead to a profound shift, back to an earlier set of values where we understood how dependent we were on the earth and its natural systems and resources,” a welcome note of optimism.

Although the mainstream media has ignored the warnings of hundreds of prestigious scientists, Dr. Tobias’ research reveals how many of the world’s governments, non-governmental organizations and foundations have begun to take action with positive results.

A major United Nations initiative began in Belgrade in 1964 with the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). The goals were to promote sustainable economic growth and to mobilize human resources in all countries. The ICPD met again in 1974 in Bucharest, 1984 in Mexico City and in Cairo in 1994 where the Cairo Document was signed.

In the Cairo Document one hundred eighty countries pledged to financially support reproductive freedom of choice for families in developing countries. The Document supports research demonstrating that when a communities’ basic needs are addressed, be it health care, economic growth or adequate food, and women are given freedom, services and information, they will choose to limit their families.

In the past, governing bodies have attempted to dictate a generic formula for population control. Even when heavily funded, fertility rates remained high because every culture, every village and every family is faced with unique concerns that need to be addressed specifically before couples are willing to change the size of their family.

Knowing that the children they conceive will continue to live is one of the fundamental issues common to all parents in undeveloped countries. When women are assured that at least half of their children will not perish from hunger or disease, they will choose to limit the size of their families.

With this understanding the international community in Cairo promised to donate 5.7 billion dollars a year by 2000 to developing a stabilized world population. Despite the fact that less than half of the pledges have been met, progress in some developing countries has been remarkable, credited in a large degree to the dedicated work of volunteers and non-governmental foundations.

In the Islamic country of Iran for example, fertility has declined from 6.5 children per couple in 1986 to around 2.0 in 2000. In Mexico, a predominately Catholic country, there has also been a dramatic drop in fertility and teen pregnancies. It is in part attributed to Mexican government programs requiring that sex education and family planning be presented in schools.

Indonesia with 218 million people is considered to have one of the world’s most successful family planning and woman’s health programs. It is a holistic program focusing not only on providing family healthcare centers and education but also on income generating activities for families. It has become a training ground for visitors from abroad and its success demonstrates that when the local people are involved and their unique needs are addressed, change happens.

India has complex demographics and although much of the country continues to suffer excessive child and maternal mortality rates as well as AIDS/HIV deaths, programs have been

initiated that have brought the fertility rate down from six children in the average family to just over three. There is still work to be done but this trend is encouraging.

Dr. Tobias' research has shown that the women of the world are the deciding factor in stabilizing the world population. Therefore the empowerment of women through education is a corner stone to successfully creating a sustainable future.

Men likewise must be educated. Smaller families will allow economic growth, better health, less personal stress, and a greatly improved environment. Once the leaders of the community and the men in the family are advocates, women are empowered and change can happen.

To attain the goal of zero-population growth, family planning must allow for free choice regarding the number and the spacing of children. Marriage must be delayed in countries whose customs promote early pregnancy. Sex education and health services need to be provided locally and at minimal cost and contraceptives must be easily accessible.

Unfortunately investigation also confirms that the choice for safe abortion and after care must be available. Dr. Joseph Speidel of the University of California, San Francisco reports that "the Global Health Council documented approximately 300 million unintended pregnancies in the past five years with 700,000 deaths relating to unsafe abortion and, even more importantly, to unsafe childbirth."

President Bush reinstated the Global Gag Rule in 2001. It cuts U.S. funding to foreign family planning organizations if they offer legal abortion or counsel or refer woman for abortion even if they use their own funding. The US has had law and policy in place since 1973 through the Helms amendment to the Foreign Assistance Act that has prohibited the use of US funds for abortion services. Funds for family planning have not been intended for abortion services for 30 years. Critics including Planned Parenthood say that the Gag Rule has seriously compromised or closed family

planning centers in developing countries because they are forced to cut services, increase fees and no longer receive the donated

contraceptives on which their population depends. As a result, fertility rates increase.

The Earth Charter

The roots of the Earth Charter are found in the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), as The Brundtland Commission, which was convened by the United Nations in 1983. The commission was created to address concern "about the accelerating deterioration of the human environment and natural resources and the consequences of that deterioration for economic and social development." In establishing the commission, the UN General Assembly recognized that environmental problems were global in nature and determined that it was in the common interest of all nations to establish policies for sustainable development." The Commission's report was published in 1987 and became the foundation for the Earth Charter.

Peter Blaze Corcoran, a senior advisor to the Earth Charter Initiative in Costa Rica expresses his view, "The gloomy and alarming forecasts for the future of life on Earth as we know it create a sense of urgency for action. Yet, almost everywhere, we see the failure of governmental and intergovernmental institutions to take effective action. In the case of my own powerful USA government, we see a comprehensive policy of *not* taking action on the most serious problems, such as anthropogenic climate change. Indeed this policy goes so far as to alter the conclusions of the science that show how serious the problems are. Most dangerously, this policy includes the rejection of all international agreements that might lead to effective action toward a sustainable world." He believes that "by specifically articulating a vision of sustainable development, (the Earth Charter) provides a path forward to achieve it." The U.S. government as yet has not ratified the Initiative.

Mikhail Gorbachev, who in 1990 won the Nobel peace Prize for his work as a political reformer and world leader, is an Earth Charter Commissioner and has played a leadership role in its development. He has written, "I believe the world is confronted today with three major challenges which encompass all other problems: the challenge of security, including the risks associated with weapons of mass destruction and terrorism, the challenge of poverty and underdeveloped economies; and the challenge of environmental sustainability ... The *Charter of the United Nations* regulates the relations among states and sets rules for their behavior in order to secure peace and stability ... the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* regulates the relations between States and individuals and guarantees to all citizens a set of rights which their governments should provide." He adds that there is one missing document that "should regulate relations among states, individuals and nature by defining human duties towards the environment. In my opinion the Earth Charter should fill this void, acquire equal status, and become the third pillar supporting the peaceful development of the modern world."

The Earth Charter is a global effort designed to overcome the obstacles to a sustainable future and as Gorbachev says, "The only answer is a universal coalition of informed, responsible and active citizens." He adds, "We ... should consider our mission accomplished only when the Earth Charter is universally adopted by the international community."

See also: www.Kit.nl/publishers.

Learn more about The Earth Charter Initiative in the book *The Earth Charter In Action: Toward A Sustainable World*, KIT publishers.

The technology is available and we know what has to be done as proven by successful grass roots programs. It's just a matter of choice and focused political will.

In the United States, some religious/political factions are attempting to deny women the right to choose safe and reasonable abortion. There is also a movement toward abstinence-only programs in schools, some of which prohibit any education regarding contraceptives. Planned Parenthood believes these programs are one of the “greatest challenges to the nation’s sexual health.”

Immigration is also a concern in America. According to some projections, legal and illegal immigration is adding as much as 2.5 million to the population of the U.S. every year. Immigration is one of the issues that must be managed more thoughtfully if we are to maintain a sustainable future.

Robert Engelman, vice-president for research at Population Action International, a non-profit research group that connects population to environment issues, warns that even without immigration the “population of the United States is growing at one of the fastest rates in the industrialized world — which is at about the same rate the world population is growing, 1.2%....there are a lot of young people having children right now...This all impinges on the environment and climate issues, given that everyone in the U.S. are all such heavy consumers.”

Don Weeden, executive director of the Weeden Foundation focuses on population growth and over-consumption in the U.S. Regarding our overuse of natural resources, he states, “Our economy is already seeing the effects of over-exploitation of natural resources and the diminishment of natural habitats, not to mention the loss of biodiversity, which is really a crime.” So even though the U.S. has attained controlled population growth, its habitual consumption of resources must successfully be addressed if it is to see a sustainable future.

One answer is presented in the book, “Cradle to Cradle,” by McDonough and Braungart. In it they demonstrate how products can be

designed from the outset so that they can continually be recycled into new useful products, thus eliminating waste and the exploitation of resources. Progress has begun by some responsible companies that have adopted their theory, and it is working.

Because of successful population management, 44% of the world’s population now has a sustainable fertility of 2.1 children per couple. To address the 56% of unsustainable growth still occurring today there are more than 3,500 companies and hundreds of voluntary foundations contributing to population management in America alone (www.usaid.gov and www.fundersnetwork.org).

Unfortunately the government of the United States has not prioritized its financial support for population management in developing countries. Although large, its contribution per capita is exceeded by countries like the Netherlands and Japan who better recognize the threat of overpopulation to world equilibrium.

Despite the drawbacks, an international transformation is occurring. The *Earth Charter Initiative* was launched in the Netherlands on June of 2000 and sets forth sixteen ethical principles and a framework for a sustainable 21st Century. Respect for diversity, ecological integrity, social and economic justice, peace, nonviolence and democratic participation are its basic themes and are integral to sustainable population growth. There have been endorsements from governments on every continent (not including the U.S.) and it has been endorsed by over two thousand organizations worldwide.

The United Nations declared 2005 to 2015 to be the decade of *Education for Sustainable Development* and UNESCO has endorsed *The Earth Charter* as a roadmap for getting there. These two initiatives alone have the potential to tame the oncoming tsunami.

Dr. Tobias reassures us that we can directly impact the future of our world.

The existing poverty can be reversed. The technology is available and we know what has to be done as proven by successful grass roots programs. It’s just a matter of choice and focused political will. The first steps have been taken and if we begin now the goals reflected in actions like the Earth Charter and the International Conference on Population and Development are attainable.

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