

## DEEP DEMOGRAPHY: GRAPPLING WITH OUR POPULATION/ENVIRONMENT DEMONS

When Arne Naess and others began referencing the world of “deep ecology” back in the 1970s and 80s, the intention was to open a field of enquiry that would reject the supposedly sustainable utilization of natural resources as deceptively contradictory; an oxymoron with looming complications. Moreover, the phrase was meant to address the alleged superiority of the human collective over all other species by going to the spiritual roots of our ecological crises and having a major re-think. The outcome was a biosphere-oriented, egalitarian philosophy in which all life forms were equal participants; equal under the laws of the heart, if not the laws of governance.

By deep demography I would hope to make clear an equally just relationship between the individual, and his or her species; between the one and the many. Conservation biologists tend to sharpen their focus from populations to individuals only at the moment of extreme peril, when the very survivability of a species has been Red Listed, so called, by the IUCN (World Conservation Union). At that point, whether with the Florida Panther or Giant Condor, huge resources are allocated, when possible, to save the last remaining few. This same paradigm figures in medical economics for people: the last few months of life, with some hindsight, tend to be the most expensive in terms of dollars.

Recently, Bob Gillespie, President of Population Communication, and I finished a documentary film, and tie-in book, entitled “No Vacancy: Global Responses to the Human Population Explosion.”

The film and book reveals population and environment programs, challenges, and conundrums in a dozen countries including the U.S., and samples numerous feelings and opinions from outstanding thinkers and activists in the fields of demography, family planning, human rights, and numerous ecological scientific avenues. Unlike my earlier book and film, “World War III – Population and the Biosphere at the End of the Millennium,” a study in despair and ecological destruction, “No Vacancy” seeks to find out what is working in the population and environment arenas. While it is true that if current fertility trends continue as is, human numbers would more than double in the coming century, to approximately 13 billion, the good news is that there are persuasive counter-trends—total fertility rates of no more than approximately 2—occurring in nearly half of all nations, suggesting a human population of be-

tween 8.5 and 9.5 billion by late in the 21st century.

The biological stakes have never been higher, however. Just as a total collapse of all fisheries has been predicted for mid-century, so too the rest of the world’s outstanding biodiversity is at risk of massive, human-induced die-offs. Even while more and more human couples are choosing to have fewer children, their consumptive impact on critical ecosystems is taking a worse toll than ever before, compounded by climate change and more and more meat eaters. As we tried to outline in “No Vacancy,” and as Dr. Paul Ehrlich eloquently summarized in the film, without a corresponding emphasis on protecting biodiversity, much of our population work will be in vain. The same *vanity*, if you will, that motivates so much humanitarian spending on curing human diseases and extending our longevity, without a corresponding emphasis on protecting biological hotspots, wilderness areas, and critical habitat for threatened and endangered species.

Deep demography, in other words, calls for the strongest coalition of conservation biology and family planning. Without huge increases in funding for the protection of nature in its obvious and not-obvious guises, all the family planning in the world is bound to fail in the ultimate sense. At just over 6.5 billion, our ungainliness as a species has already outstripped the planet. Estimates of the human overage range from 20% to 300%. At between 8.5 and 13 billion, everything we do as consumers will have to be placed under a microscope. Everything we wear, our means of travel, the food on our plates, the way our communities are built—everything—will be subject to ecological scrutiny, because we will have few choices left.

Deep demography is about grappling with the population and ecological demons we have unleashed in a forthright manner. It calls for non-violence, vegetarianism, low-impact consumerism, and children that can be loved, cared for, and properly reared. It mandates ecological restoration, and smart energy budgeting. And while capitalism with a visionary visible hand is still the best known mechanism for distributing conservation rewards, for all practical purposes, at this point, there is no vacancy on planet Earth, not for humans anyway. The hotels have all been booked.

Copyright by Michael Tobias, 2006. Michael Tobias is an ecologist, author and filmmaker. To buy “No Vacancy” go to [www.novacancythemovie.org](http://www.novacancythemovie.org). ☀