

# Seven Billion Day

In late October I attended a two-day workshop called "Global Population and the Planetary Future – 2100" in Seattle, Washington, USA. This was organised by Foundation for the Future, brainchild of inventor and philanthropist Walter Kistler. Ten participants from the USA, Australia, Russia, India, UK and South Africa convened, including Dr Norman Myers, a British environmentalist best known for his concept of biodiversity hotspots, Cornell University ecologist Prof David Pimentel and Jerry Glen, a leading futurist. Also present were Dr Joseph Chamie, former director of the United Nations Population Division and Dr Mehtab Karim, a prominent analyst of Muslim demographic futures. We were each asked to describe critical issues pivotal to humanity's long-term future. A summary of mine follows.

## The Parachute Principle

In 1989, I heard Paul Ehrlich compare the reactions of an ecologist and an economist falling from a building. The ecologist panics, but the economist is confident that demand will create a parachute. Hope is not yet lost,

all of Earth. Our species evolved from the ecology; we must now rediscover our ecological souls. To do this we need leadership, inspiration, appropriate price signals and luck. It's a tough call.

“ The Green Revolution (more food per unit of land) has won a temporary success in man's war against hunger and deprivation; it has given humans a breathing space. If fully implemented, the revolution can provide sufficient food for sustenance during the next three decades. But the frightening power of human reproduction must also be curbed, otherwise the successes of The Green Revolution will be ephemeral only.”

Norman Borlaug, 1970

It is only about five decades since a large number of humans began to understand that there are planetary Limits to Growth (diminishing resources such as good soil, oil and phosphate that will eventually limit the size of the human population). In 1970 Norman Borlaug, in his Nobel Prize for Peace speech, warned that humanity would soon face a great struggle to feed itself (see box).

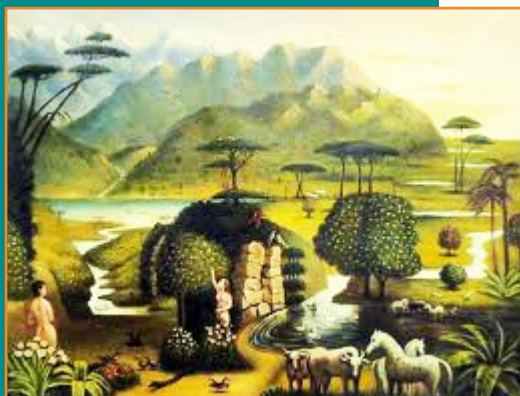
Within 15 years most world leaders forgot Borlaug's warning. Public policies instead promulgated the idea that Limits to Growth

promote personal and family security at a time when public goods are in obvious decline and when the once-plausible task of promoting health and well-being for all appears to be fading, even as an aspiration. Current solutions buy short-term relief but intensify middle- and long-term risk.

On the positive side, emerging technologies and old-fashioned human courage suggest ways that could reduce these problems. The Arab Spring has seen an encouraging reaction against repressive autocracies. The Occupy movements illustrate an overdue response to the stranglehold of big money and big corporations. What is really needed is a *Global Spring*, an overthrowing of old-world thinking which 1) keeps the world wedded to a toxic cocktail of profligate fossil-fuel use and 2) promotes the *hedonic treadmill* (the fruitless pursuit of material and status goods as the way to happiness). Key elements of this re-awakening will be *contraction and convergence* (less ecological waste by the rich and more consumption of materials and information by the poor), particularly through global education and rights-based family planning.

## Academic Wars: population & sustainability

A July, 2011 issue of *Science*, the world's second-ranked scientific journal, featured population, including a long essay concerning the district of Machakos, in Kenya, identified by Ester Boserup (a leading 20th century development academic) and others as



L: Erastus Salisbury Field (1805-1900), The Garden of Eden; rt: homes along the railway in Guwahati, Assam, India. Photo courtesy Phillip Dean Lotus Flower Trust

A dream



A reality



ingenuity inspires. Theoretical ecological and social solutions to our dilemma exist, such as clean energy, mass urban farming and desalination. But to open the parachute, we need to recognise the closeness of the ground. Too many modern economists still deny the nearing crisis. Technology is insufficient; we also need an unprecedented scale of human co-operation. Anxiety is justified, given our collective peril. The threat is from ourselves, *Homo sapiens*, especially our ancient, evolutionarily-programmed propensity to think small and primarily to identify with limited groups, such as those that are tribal or based on faith or language.

Such strategies sustained our ancestors for several million years, until humans displaced numerous other predators and occupied almost

were passé, ushering in three decades of the *Cornucopian Enchantment*, a period when most political, spiritual, corporate and scientific leaders denied the severity of our coalescing problems. It is thus unsurprising that denial, driven by confusion and suppression, still permeates societies globally. We have increasing collective understanding of global climate change (including extremely severe flooding most recently in Thailand and Cambodia), declining biodiversity, worsening droughts (the famine in Somalia has now been linked with climate change), ocean acidification, rising energy and food prices, falling groundwater, economic madness and large-scale political blindness. Rising inequality and corruption are quasi-rational responses by officials and elites, justified by practitioners and perpetrators to

demonstrating how more people in a given area can improve human well-being. The essay, like many in this special issue and many others generally, represents the debate concerning Limits to Growth and human population numbers as ongoing. Yet, the author says, in passing: "Greater economic stability also led families to have fewer children and invest more in education". If there truly were no Limits to Growth, then why would lower fertility be listed as a benefit? While it is true that a scientific debate still exists concerning these issues (largely a hangover of the Cornucopian Enchantment), it is time for the debate to end and effective action to begin. Limits to Growth are real, close and perilous.

For further information, please see [www.futurefoundation.org/programs/hum\\_wrk8.htm](http://www.futurefoundation.org/programs/hum_wrk8.htm)

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