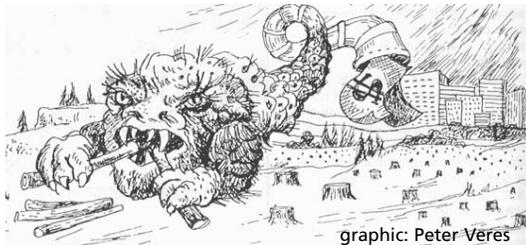


History Notes

by William P. Meyers



graphic: Peter Veres

Human Weeds

Modern humans are weeds. Let a breeding couple get to a previously unexploited land, whether a tiny island or a continent, and soon enough it will be overrun by people at the expense of most other species.

It was not always that way. Ten million years ago ancestors and relatives to humans, including gorillas and chimpanzees, numbered less than two million individuals and were all confined to Africa. A million years ago homo erectus had migrated to Europe and Asia, but scattered about at low densities. Even a hundred thousand years ago homo sapiens still numbered in the low millions world wide. As recently as ten thousand years ago, after the Americas had been populated by humans, the world's population came in around five million people.

With the widespread adoption of agriculture, the population climbed more dramatically. By 1000 B.C. the human population may have reached 50 million; there were a number of cities with populations of over 50,000. A mere thousand years later, in the time of Augustus Caesar, 200 million people may have inhabited the world.

By the time European humans began their conquest of the Americas the population was in the 500 million range. The conversion of natural lands

to farmland continued to swell the population, but then the Industrial Revolution got underway as well. World population climbed to 1 billion around 1800 and to over 1.5 billion by 1900.

Up until 1900, human medicine was relatively primitive and often ineffective. But advances in biological science combined with the corporate profit motive began conquering big killers like yellow fever, malaria, and worm infestations. Modern medicine and global food networks prevented the usual natural mechanisms of population control, disease and starvation, from working in the 20th century. In A.D. 2000, the world population of humans was around 6 billion; at the other end of the teeter-totter, numerous species had gone extinct or declined severely.

About another half-billion people are alive today than there were 7 years ago. That is equal to the world's entire population in the Late Middle Ages.

In this era of global warming, corporate dominance of the debate about solutions means that the population issue will not be addressed. Higher human populations mean higher demand for everything from real estate to Priuses. Declining populations would require a whole new economic mindset that goes against the intrinsic values of for-profit corporations.

In high per capita consumption countries like the United States, tax laws still encourage people to have children. A rational policy for our era would be to double the income tax credit for a family's first child, give no credit for a second child, and penalize families with more than two children. Rights have to be balanced against responsibilities; no family should be encouraged to have more than two children given the real world situation that we face.

William P. Meyers is the author of The Santa Clara Blues: Corporate Personhood Versus Democracy. He serves on the Point Arena, CA school board and the board of the California Center for Community Democracy.

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