

THIS ELEPHANT IS A RED HERRING

MIKE HANNIS explains why restricting immigration is not an environmental policy.

There is, apparently, an elephant in the room again. Advocates of population control complain that political correctness is stifling debate about the world's growing human population. They claim that efforts to reduce population need not be tainted by coercion or racism, as they were in the past. This may be true, though the loudest voices promoting the reduction of fertility rates in 'underdeveloped' countries, especially sub-Saharan Africa, still belong to privileged people from very overdeveloped countries. Some of these people are obviously well-meaning. David Attenborough for instance is a patron of Population Matters, which may help explain why his BBC TV series *Africa* showed so few of the African people whose home landscapes were so lovingly portrayed as empty pristine wilderness dotted with exotic wildlife.

There is of course no dispute in environmentalist circles that the overall environmental impact of human civilisation urgently needs reducing. The I=PAT formula (see page 21), while simplistic, does capture a basic truth. More people does mean more impact, even though some people have vastly more impact than others, and even though research repeatedly confirms that 'more immediate results for sustainability would emerge from policies and technologies that reverse rising consumption of natural resources'.¹

As discussed on page 21, many fear that talking about P (population) will shift the focus away from A (affluence): any alternative to addressing overconsumption and inequality is always eagerly seized upon by those seeking to protect the disastrous *status quo*. Plenty of thoughtful people also want to focus on T (technology). Ever-increasing technological sophistication need not be assumed, and as *The Land* has always been at pains to point out, not all varieties of 'Luddism' deserve their bad reputation. I=PAT should perhaps be refined to something like I=PACT, introducing a 'Culture' variable reflecting the fact that consumption levels need not inexorably follow affluence levels.

More fundamentally, many simply believe that people's reproductive decisions are personal matters that no government or well-meaning NGO should interfere with. Reinventing population control as an education project has perhaps allowed some such people to have their cake and eat it. 'Educating' people into wanting something you think they ought to want is not the same as helping them to make their own decisions.

Possible criteria

While population levels are clearly an important variable in the gloomy calculus of ecological crisis, this does not reduce anyone's obligations towards other real, present-day human beings. Still, measures to reduce population growth rates may be legitimate and ethically acceptable tools for reducing overall human impact, provided they:



Propaganda mural in China. Recent relaxation of the 'one child policy' means that parents who were themselves only an only child are now permitted two offspring.

(1) **Are transparent, genuine and effective.** Defining effectiveness here will always be controversial, and needs to be done in consultation with the people affected. Policies should obviously achieve demonstrable and significant reductions in birth rates, but not beyond what is culturally and socially acceptable in context. Nor should they be driven by political advantage or commercial profit.

(2) **Are equitably applied, and not financially regressive.** Whether deliberately or accidentally, control of overall population levels must not have the effect of furthering the interests of one social group over others. This means, in particular, that they must not be used to disproportionately reduce either the numbers or the resource share of particular social, cultural or ethnic groups, whether at a regional, national or global scale.

(3) **Do not undermine efforts to reduce consumption levels** or to achieve other important sustainability goals, whether directly or by diverting resources and attention.

(4) **Are politically, legally and ethically justifiable in their own right.** The need to address population levels does not trump governments' ethical or legal duties to respect and uphold human rights. This means that any measures adopted must not be coercive, deceptive, exploitative, or otherwise detrimental to anyone's human rights.

Even this very provisional list of criteria rules out many potential (and some historically common) approaches to population control, but there are still practical measures which can satisfy them. Genuinely open-ended education about, and provision of, appropriate family planning options is one. So is the culturally sensitive promotion among both women and men of gender equality and women's empowerment. These two, broadly speaking, now constitute the global mainstream approach to population policy. However there are many ways in which even these can easily fall foul of one or more of the tests above. For instance, where 'education' shades into the promotion of high-consumption 'Western' lifestyles, this can both raise *per capita* consumption (failing test 3) and endanger the survival of other cultures (failing tests 2 & 4).



Spanish coastguards intercept a West African fishing boat laden with migrants off Tenerife in 2007. Almost 20,000 people have died trying to reach Europe's southern borders from Africa and the Middle East in the past twenty years, the majority of them at sea.

Direct restriction of the 'right to procreate' is at least clear and transparent. China's 'one child policy', if applied equally to all (a very big 'if') probably passes tests 1 to 3, but is of course widely considered to fail test 4 pretty badly. Less draconian versions such as a 'two child policy' might also do so, depending on prevailing social and ethical norms. (Would a 'ten child policy' infringe anyone's rights?) Any linkage of reproductive rights to economic status, such as requiring prospective parents to have 'sufficient resources' to raise a child as Paul Watson suggests (see page 34), would however completely fail test 2.

Sustainability and Immigration

There are plenty of proposed measures which fail all four tests. One example is the surprisingly common suggestion that population control, and thereby ecological sustainability, should be pursued through immigration policy. This idea is often advanced by highly dubious organisations whose real agenda is the restriction of immigration for other reasons altogether, including nationalism or outright racism. But it is also promoted by some genuine and thoughtful environmentalists – not least Jonathan Porritt, as noted on page 26.²

American philosopher Phil Cafaro argues eloquently against the endless pursuit of economic growth, is clearly very serious about environmental issues, and is a respected ethicist. Why then does he make this provocative claim that environmentalists should endorse tough immigration policy?

"A serious commitment to environmentalism entails ending America's population growth by implementing a more restrictive immigration policy. The need to limit immigration necessarily follows when we combine a clear statement of our main environmental goals — living sustainably and sharing the landscape generously with other species — with uncontroversial accounts of our current demographic trajectory and of the negative environmental effects of US population growth, nationally and globally."³

Cafaro argues that US population has already grown so high that the continued existence of 'wild nature' in the US will be seriously threatened if this growth continues. Moreover, due to their excessive and inequitable resource consumption and greenhouse gas emissions, the growing number of Americans is also a key driver of *global* environmental problems, particularly

climate change. So, measures to stabilise or ideally reduce the US population will help solve both domestic and global environmental problems, and should therefore be embraced by environmentalists, and enacted by the US government. Since it's immigration that's driving US population upwards, this means that environmentalists should support tighter restrictions on immigration into the US.⁴

Hearing the US described as overpopulated is surprising to European ears. Of the 100 most populous countries, the US is only the 76th most densely populated, with 84 people per square mile. The UK comes in at number 15, with 679 people per square mile.⁵ The US certainly has serious environmental problems within its borders, but it seems very odd to claim that these are caused by the number of Americans, rather than by their world-leading consumption levels. The weakness of Cafaro's argument here is well-illustrated by his own chosen example of 'urban sprawl', which in the US context is driven not by population increase, still less by immigration, but by poor planning and profligate use of abundant land. The proposed link between immigration to the US and global climate change is if anything even more suspect.

Ethical problems

While Cafaro's overall argument clearly has flaws, there is some truth to the reduced claim that fewer Americans might mean less environmental destruction, at least within the US. This however says nothing about whether tightening immigration laws would constitute a population control measure capable of meeting the ethical criteria discussed above. In fact the proposal fails on all four counts.

1) It is not effective, particularly as regards global problems such as climate change. The obvious objection is that moving people around, or stopping them moving, can only ever be a zero sum game. Keeping would-be immigrants out of the US (or the UK, or the EU) just means they either continue living, consuming and polluting wherever they are, or perhaps try another destination. It cannot magically lead to a lower global population, and so cannot reduce total global emissions.

Writers such as Cafaro acknowledge this objection, but claim that since Americans consume so much more, allowing

people to *become* Americans produces a net increase in global consumption compared to keeping them out. Population Matters use the same logic:

Migrants tend to move from low-consuming regions to high-consuming ones. In the process of becoming Western consumers, they raise their ecological footprint, increase their environmental impact and thus accelerate global environmental damage.⁶

It's not true, of course, that people's consumption rises only if they move to a high-consumption country. High-consuming elites exist almost everywhere. Perhaps more significantly, to imagine that new immigrants to the US or the UK consume at anything like the national average is pure sophistry. It's also sometimes argued that lax immigration policy actually encourages people in poorer counties to have more children, in the hope that some of them will emigrate to countries like the US and send money back home. As well as being ethically objectionable, this argument has been shown to be without any factual basis.⁷

2) It is highly inequitable, particularly in the case of the US, where restricting immigration would keep the country *underpopulated* by global average standards, pulling up the drawbridge and maintaining a historic advantage gained and maintained by force. Though this is not Cafaro's aim, restricting US population would in practice help that country to maintain average consumption rates among the highest in the world.

Broader 'open borders' arguments defending a human right of free movement come into play here too (as they do under test 4), though they are not essential to make the point.⁸

3) It undermines efforts to reduce *per capita* consumption and emission levels. Cafaro wholeheartedly endorses such efforts, but also says that 'convincing Americans to implement such sweeping expensive changes will be difficult' and that environmentalists should not put all their eggs in this basket, since the changes may never get made. He goes on to say that it is unrealistic to aim for US consumption to go any lower than current European or Japanese levels. This is obviously not going to be sufficient, and such defeatism just assists those resisting any policies aimed at reducing consumption at all.

4) Restricting immigration involves great suffering and serious human rights violations. Restricting it further can only increase this. Cafaro presents his suggested policies as non-coercive, and those making such arguments often claim to be 'anti-immigration but not anti-immigrant'. This is highly disingenuous, because it disconnects policies that make it harder to cross borders legally from the tragic numbers of people injured or killed trying to cross them illegally. Recent authoritative research suggests there have been at least 40,000 such deaths worldwide since the year 2000. Many of these were heading for the EU.⁹

Environmentalism starts at home?

Cafaro argues that environmentalists everywhere have a special responsibility to look after their own patch as best they can. This is true, but doesn't mean they should endorse policies which simply shift the damage to somewhere else. Fighting to protect "nature" in the US is important and laudable. But doing so by protecting that country's low population density

relative to other countries, instead of getting serious about changing habits, lifestyles and politics, is not just ineffective. It risks making matters substantially worse.

Egalitarianism is not an optional bolt-on extra to environmentalism in today's globalised world. It's impossible to make any practical sense of the notion of sustainability without the idea that average consumption should somehow be limited to what is ecologically possible for all. Yes, a growing population makes this harder – and certainly needs to be taken into account – but it doesn't change the basic principle.

Take global climate change talks. Even assuming that all parties negotiate in good faith, while high-consuming countries seek to protect their various advantages, rather than accepting the need to converge towards one globally sustainable *per capita* emissions level, there will never be any chance of reaching a meaningful or effective agreement. Working out what this common level might be is complicated, and all the more so with a growing population. But without agreement in principle on what would be fair, there is simply no possibility of ever finding enough common ground for negotiations to get anywhere.

Serious environmentalists everywhere need to push their governments in this direction. In so doing, it's important to resist those who (for a variety of reasons) try to muddy the water with arguments about immigration. It's equally important to resist other spurious attempts to link population and climate change, perhaps the most bizarre of which comes from right here in the UK. Population Matters' infamous PopOffsets scheme offers high consumers in the UK the chance to offset their carbon emissions by investing in family planning promotion in Africa:

PopOffsets helps you to offset your footprint by helping others to avoid unplanned pregnancies with no environmental downside: it's win - win!¹¹

As is almost always the case with schemes claiming to offset impacts rather than reduce them, nobody really wins here.¹⁴ This one, though, is worse than most. It would be hard to imagine a more reprehensible way of evading responsibility for one's own ecological footprint than paying to ensure that an unknown number of poorer people don't get to have one at all. In this context, just as with the idea that immigration control can help achieve sustainability, population is not so much an elephant in the room as a dangerous red herring.

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