

Human Population and Ecological Restoration

Twenty years ago, I spent March 31 with a few hundred other people attending the Sixth Northern Illinois Prairie Conference in Crystal Lake, Illinois. It was my first conference of this type and I was really energized by everyone's enthusiasm for prairie preservation and restoration. Now, as I look back at the conference proceedings, I realize that the speakers that day were the vanguard of the prairie restoration movement in Illinois and Wisconsin. I recall being taken not only by how much they knew about prairies, but by how inspired everyone was about their work. There was a palpable electricity in the air that day. And of all the speakers, the most memorable for me was the afternoon keynoter, Dr. Hugh Iltis of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Botany Department. In his talk, "Endangered Species and Genetic Diversity," Dr. Iltis sharply criticized humanity for destroying the biodiversity of the Earth by its sheer numbers and consumptive habits. I recall him exhorting everyone to do their part to conserve the precious and diverse ecosystems, like prairies, that we were so rapidly losing to our own hubris and ignorance. His was a long speech at the end of a long day, and while he was repeatedly reminded to stop, Dr. Iltis, nevertheless, went on before sending everyone home with a pat on the back for their good work, and a pointed reminder that there was plenty more to accomplish before the Earth would be saved.

Fast-forward twenty years—I'm in my office at the Arboretum writing this editorial, and ecological restoration has emerged as a major component of the conservation agenda. People across North America and around the globe are involved in restoration or rehabilitation projects—ever hopeful that their work will offset the continuing negative influences humans have on the environment. Unfortunately, while a relatively small but growing number of us have followed the positive aspirations of restoration, humanity in general has failed to curb its population, which has grown by 2 billion in the last 20 years, and, perhaps, more problematic, our global propensity to consume has only increased. What is one to think?

My take, from an admittedly well-off position in North America, is that this is not the time to panic or do anything rash. Those people and organizations calling for immigration quotas and the like are as off the mark as William Vogt, the mid-20th

century population control expert and author of *Road to Survival* (1948), was when he called for stopping food shipments to India and China because their populations were too large, and for the use of large-scale bacterial agents to poison human populations. Yes, the ever-expanding human population is a serious, and often unspoken, environmental problem, but immigration quotas, genocide, and eugenics are simplistic, unthinkable solutions.

One answer that occurs to me is putting significantly more vision and dollars behind efforts that help people restore their local ecosystems while at the same upgrading their local economies. This emphasis on place-based ecological restoration and rehabilitation, as exemplified by the work Rich Beilfuss of the International Crane Foundation is doing in Mozambique and by the situation in Madagascar that Louise Holloway describes in this issue, should give people more reason to stay where they were born, provide them with food, building materials, jobs and a better environment, and, in the long run, take the emphasis off having more children as a means of securing their long-term well-being. Developed countries should see such policies as a means of ensuring their own security. They could organize and support a Global Restoration Corps, modeled after the Peace Corps, to provide both technical assistance and promote international goodwill.

But aid is only part of the solution—people everywhere need to meditate and act on their personal desire to consume and possess more and more things. For their part, governments should develop incentives that encourage people to consume less or at least consume more wisely, and other incentives for manufacturers, food suppliers, and packagers to produce more ecologically-friendly products. Globally, international agreements about free trade should include conditions that better organize the global food economy with the goal of feeding everyone rather than making some people rich. We all have to do something beyond simply restoring prairies, I have learned. As David Suzuki told the attendees at the recent Meeting of the Seventh Conference of Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in Kuala Lumpur, "If we don't deal with hunger and poverty, we can forget the environment; people have other priorities."

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