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for an Ecologically Sustainable World

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U. S. Population Passes 300 Million

Judy Lumb and Barbara Day

Sometime in October of 2006 the U.S. population passed 300 million. In the first U.S. census of 1790, the population of the new country was counted as 3.9 million. In 1915 the U.S. population passed the 100 million mark and in 1967 it passed 200 million.¹ The U.S. population is projected to continue to grow at a gradually decreasing rate for another two centuries, approaching 450 million by 2100, under the middle assumptions of fertility, mortality, and migration—a 50 percent increase from the 300 million of today!² (Fig. 1)

The U.S. is adding three million persons every year, one person every 11 seconds. California alone is adding 900 persons per day. Approximately half of the increase is from the excess of births over deaths and half is from immigration. This rapid growth is at great cost to the health of the planet and to other species that share our space. In fact, the human population of the U.S. is already using our natural resources at a rate much higher than they can be regenerated and five times that of the poorest countries on Earth. Because of our over-consumption, additional persons in the U.S. have a much greater impact upon Earth than those of other countries.

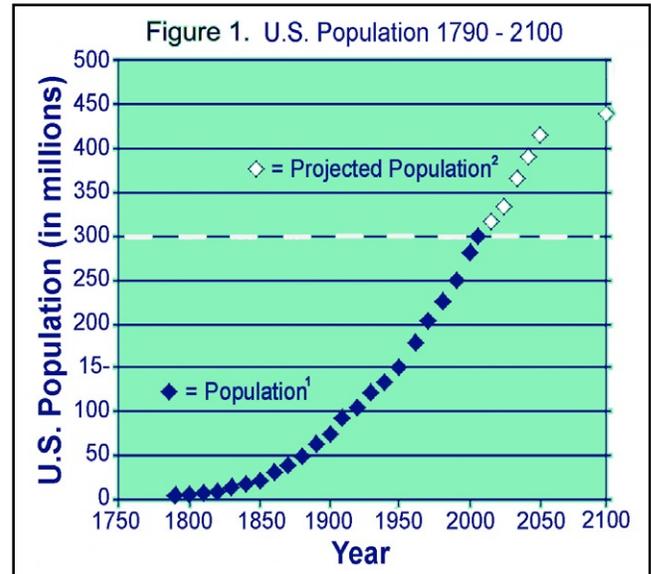
In this *QEB* we acknowledge this milestone of reaching 300 million people in the U.S. by expressing concern about our growing numbers and the impact our lifestyle has on the health of the planet. We ask, “Who are we?” and “What is our impact upon Earth?”

Friends’ Concerns about Population

Friends have been aware for some time that the rapid growth of the human population is one underlying cause of social injustice, wars, oppression, and environmental degradation. The Population Concerns Committee of Quaker Earthcare Witness (QEW) has published brochures on population, sexuality, abortion, adoption, and immigration,³ as well as a book of 23 essays on a variety of population issues.⁴ Recognizing that the problems of over-population and over-consumption in the U.S. are both contributors to environmental degradation, the Population Concerns Committee has been folded into the Sustainability: Faith and Action Committee of QEW.

The first *Quaker Eco-Bulletin* (*QEB*) focused on population control and public policy.⁵ Other *QEBs* have focused on emergency contraception and abortion,⁶ and on population expansion, resource usage, immigration, and the challenges of an aging population.⁷

Friends have protested public policies that undermine family planning. “In his first day in office, President Bush reinstated the U.S. policy that prohibits use of any U.S. foreign assistance monies to any family planning organization that counsels women about the option of abortion.... But cutting off funds for contraception will lead to more abortions, not fewer.”⁸



There is a growing consensus that population, poverty and gender equality are intimately linked. “Women’s level of education is the strongest single background predictor of population fertility levels.”⁵

Friends have always been committed to the equality of women. Thus, it is important that the most effective mechanisms for reduction of fertility and consequently reduction of poverty are:

- Improvement in education for girls and women,
- Readily available reproductive health services, and
- Empowerment of women.⁸

Who Are We?

Immigrants

We are all immigrants or descended from immigrants. The first humans in the area now known as the United States came across the Bering Strait during the last big Ice Age when much of

Table 1. U.S. Population Ethnic Diversity in 2000

Ethnic Group	First Arrived (years ago)	Percent of U.S. population ⁹	Percent living in poverty ¹⁰
Native American	12,000	1.2	25.7
Native Hawaiian	1,700	0.3	17.7
Hispanic	408	13.4	22.6
European	387	70.4	8.1
African-American	387	12.6	24.9
Asian	157	4.1	12.6

Quaker Eco-Bulletin (QEB) is published bi-monthly by Quaker Earthcare Witness (formerly FCUN) as an insert in *BeFriending Creation*.

The vision of **Quaker Earthcare Witness (QEW)** includes integrating into the beliefs and practices of the Society of Friends the Truths that God's Creation is to be held in reverence in its own right, and that human aspirations for peace and justice depend upon restoring the Earth's ecological integrity. As a member organization of Friends Committee on National Legislation, QEW seeks to strengthen Friends' support for FCNL's witness in Washington DC for peace, justice, and an Earth restored.

QEB's purpose is to advance Friends' witness on public and institutional policies that affect the Earth's capacity to support life. QEB articles aim to inform Friends about public and corporate policies that have an impact on society's relationship to Earth, and to provide analysis and critique of societal trends and institutions that threaten the health of the planet.

Friends are invited to contact us about writing an article for **QEB**. Submissions are subject to editing and should:

- Explain why the issue is a Friends' concern.
- Provide accurate, documented background information that reflects the complexity of the issue and is respectful toward other points of view.
- Relate the issue to legislation or corporate policy.
- List what Friends can do.
- Provide references and sources for additional information.

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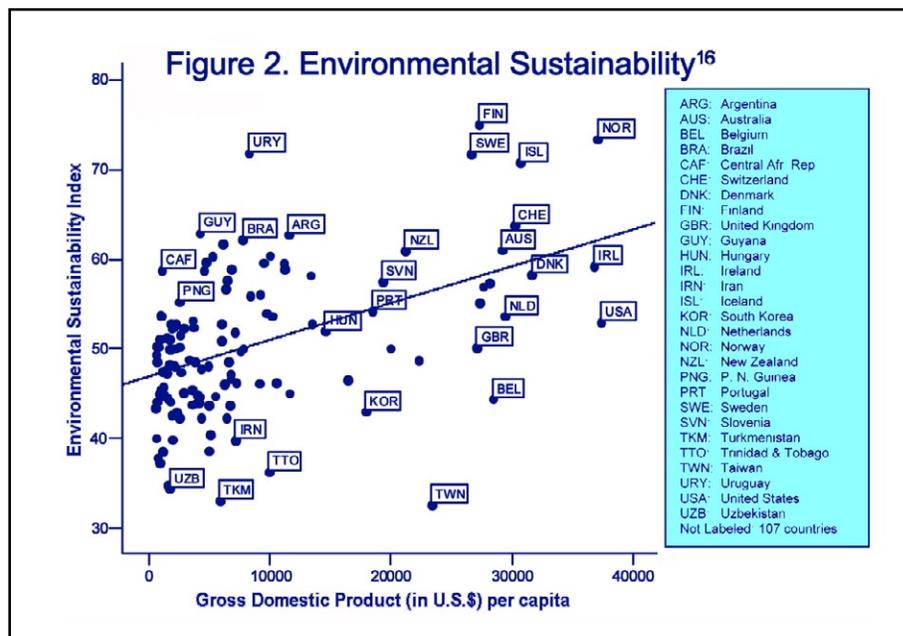
Earth's water was frozen in glaciers so the sea level was low enough for a land bridge to emerge. Archeologists have determined that human migrations into this area began approximately 12,000 years ago. Native Americans descended from those first settlers now make up approximately 1.2 percent of the total population with the highest poverty rate (26 percent).⁸ Hawaii was first settled by Polynesian immigrants approximately 1,700 years ago. The first European immigrants joined the Native Americans in 1598 when Spanish colonists began to settle in what is now New Mexico. Two decades later immigrants fleeing religious intolerance in northern Europe began coming to the east coast of the U.S. Some of them brought people of African descent as slaves. Immigrants have continued to arrive through the centuries, but large numbers came as a result of conditions such as the potato famine in Ireland, religious and economic problems in Poland, and crop failures in Italy in the 19th and early 20th centuries.¹¹ (*Table 1*)

In recent years deteriorating economic conditions and political oppression throughout the world have brought more refugees and immigrants to the U.S. than to any other country—one-fifth of all international migrants. Persons born elsewhere amount to about 12 percent of the total U.S. population.¹² But the U.S. is not alone. Australia, Belize, Canada, and Ireland actually have higher percentages of foreign-born persons among their populations than the U.S. has.¹³

Income

The U.S. is the third most populous country in the world—behind China with 1.3 billion and India with more than one billion—and is also among the wealthiest. The U.S. has the fourth highest gross national income per capita (\$37,610), after Luxembourg, Norway, and Switzerland, but the distribution of income in the U.S. is more like that of a developing country. Studies of income distribution ranked the U.S. 71st in regard to the percent share of income among the 40 percent lowest income households and 62nd in regard to the percent share of income among the 20 percent highest income households. All the other industrialized countries have much higher percentage shares of income in the lowest 40 percent and lower percentages in the highest 20 percent, that is, much fairer distributions of income.¹⁴

Both within the U.S., and between the U.S. and the poorer countries of the world, there is a large gap between those who have wealth, income, and resources, the “haves,” and those who are lacking those same amenities, the “have-nots.” This accounts for the large immigration to the U.S. as the have-nots search for a better life. Life is a great gift, but that gift is demeaned by both the stresses brought about by the increasing human population and the tremendously unfair distribution of resources, both nationally and internationally.



What Is Our Impact upon Earth?

In the 1960s I believed that lowering human birthrates would be the most difficult task facing those who wished to achieve a sustainable society—because having fewer children was basically going “against biology.” In fact, lowering birthrates has proven easier than I expected, and substantial (but not enough) progress has been made since then. Reducing over-consumption has proven very much more difficult.

—Paul Ehrlich¹⁵

Environmental Sustainability Index

The big question is whether the U.S. can sustain life as it is today in the face of a rapidly increasing population. To assess sustainability the Environmental Sustainability Index (ESI) uses 76 data sets that measure natural resources available, pollution levels, environmental management, and the capacity of a country to improve its environmental management. The result is ESI, an index of human well-being based upon quality of life and its sustainability.¹⁶ (Fig. 2)

The U.S. has the highest gross domestic product per capita, but an ESI that was well below most of the industrialized countries. The U.S. ranked 45th of the 146 countries studied. Indicators showed that the U.S. had especially high levels of greenhouse gas emissions, high levels of pollution, and high rates of conversion of natural land. However, the U.S. track record for wilderness preservation and investment in environmental management were positive indicators.

Ecological Footprint Analysis

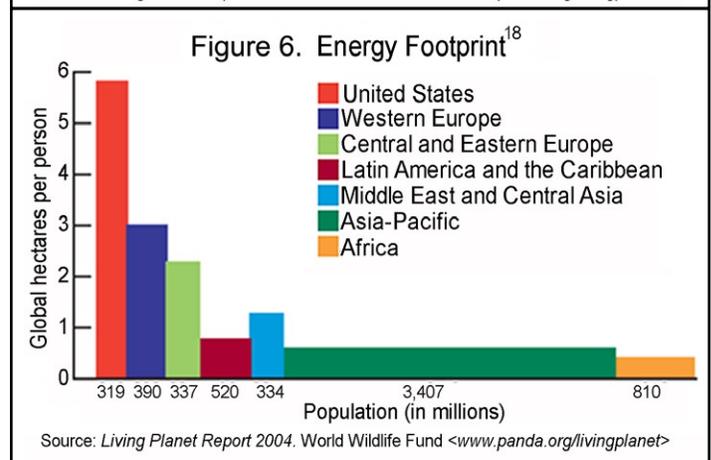
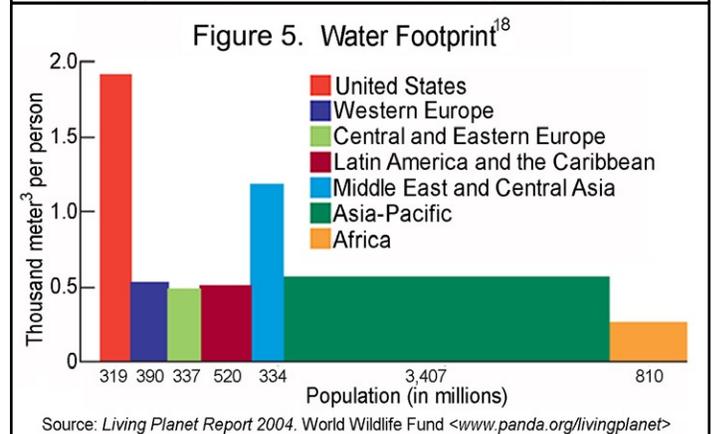
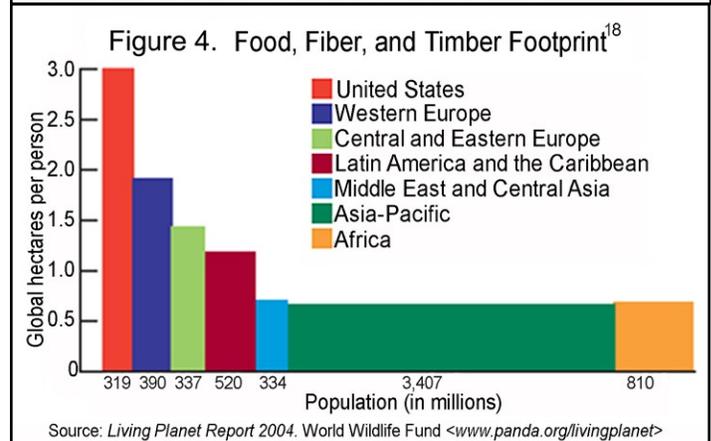
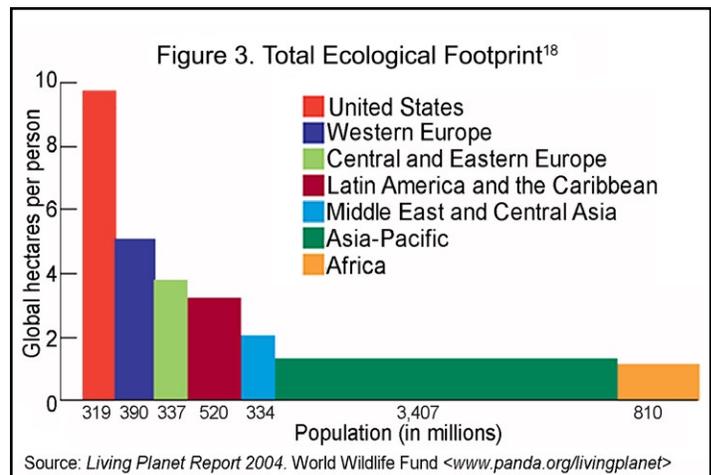
Another method of analyzing sustainability is Ecological Footprint (EF) analysis. A global hectare (2.47 acres) is defined as a hectare of average productivity to meet human needs (biocapacity). The overall EF of the U.S. was 9.7 global hectares per person (ghp) in 2002. Only the United Arab Emirates was higher. In contrast, the average EF for the European Union countries was 4.7 ghp. The average for middle income countries was 1.9 ghp and for low income countries 0.8 ghp.¹⁷

EF analysis using 2002 data is represented in the figures (Figs. 3-6). The width of each bar is equivalent to the total population in that group of countries. For example, the population of the African continent is 810 million. The height of each bar is the EF per person, and the area of each bar is the total amount of the footprint.

These figures tell the startling story of over-consumption in the U.S. The U.S. footprint is twice that of the other industrialized countries in most categories—in total footprint; food, timber and fiber footprint; and energy usage. The U.S. water usage footprint is three times that of all other countries, except those in the Middle East and the U.S. uses nearly twice as much water per person as those desert countries do. (Fig. 5)

The calculated available biocapacity on Earth is 1.8 ghp, but the biocapacity used by the human population on Earth in 2002 was 2.2 ghp—about 20 percent more than we have. If everyone on Earth lived like we do in the U.S., it would take five Earths to support us!

The amount by which the EF exceeds the biocapacity of the space available to that country is called the “ecological deficit.” The U.S. ecological deficit is -4.9 ghp, the fourth highest in the world, behind United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Cyprus. Even with all



our resources, we are still living way beyond our biocapacity. The countries of the European Union are also living beyond their capacity, but their ecological deficit is half that of the U.S. (-2.4 ghp).

Automobiles

One reason for U.S. over-consumption is our cars. The lifestyle of the average family in U.S. is dependent upon the convenience of the private automobile. Most modern families in the U.S. cannot function without a lot of driving. Families are spread all over, which requires travel for visits. Children are involved in organized sports, the arts, and other activities. One cannot get to all the soccer games and ballet lessons on time without a private automobile. Public transportation is either completely lacking or takes so long that it is not convenient. There are 237 million vehicles, which is 0.81 vehicles per person in the U.S. On the highways 174 trillion gallons of gasoline are used per year. That is an average of 1,360 gallons per year for each vehicle.¹⁹

U.S. Lifestyle and Culture

Why does our use of Earth's resources amount to as much as double the rate of that used by other industrialized countries? A visit to Sweden provided some insight. "The contrast that struck us the most was Sweden's world-class transportation system. Cars have a place, but the majority of Swedes get around on clean, quiet, energy-efficient rapid public transit.... Most Swedes don't have to be sold on the idea of bicycles as serious transportation.... Bicycle commuters have their own road systems, not mere 'lanes' squeezed in as afterthoughts."²⁰

European countries have lived for centuries crowded into a relatively small space. The European migration to the U.S. was based upon the promise of space and abundance of natural resources—with no limits! Our culture has evolved with that frontier mentality, which has resulted in urban sprawl. Residential areas of cities in the U.S. have spread farther and farther into the countryside which eliminates more and more natural and farm lands.

Our consumption of Earth's resources is way out of balance with that of the rest of the world's population and far exceeds the capacity of even our own natural resources. Our challenge is to recognize that our over-consumption is a direct result of our culture. We must find ways to change our culture so we can reduce our impact upon Earth.

Because the impact upon Earth of additional persons in the U.S. is so much greater than that of other countries in the world, our increasing numbers are a serious problem. Reducing our impact upon Earth requires us to work at both reducing our over-consumption and stabilizing our population size.

The authors thank Stan Becker and Roy Treadway for their patient and comprehensive reviews of this article.

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What Friends Can Do

- 1) Educate yourself and others about population matters.
- 2) Support reproductive healthcare. Work for change in the U.S. policy toward support for national and international family planning organizations.
- 3) Support organizations that empower women, both nationally and internationally.
- 4) Calculate your ecological footprint and analyze the impact your family makes upon Earth.
- 5) Organize discussion groups in your Friends Meeting around our population growth, our impact upon the Earth and the cultural changes that are needed to reduce them.
- 6) Write letters to the Editor and use other means to spread the word about the rapid increase in our population and our over-consumption, and the best ways to reduce them.