

The Oregonian

Treading on a taboo

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Each Tuesday I carry the recycling to the curb and look out over a city bristling with light rail, streetcars, bicycles, eco-roofs, and little yellow bins like mine. The greenest of the green, my city styles itself, filled with good citizens leading the way to Earth's salvation.

If only it were true. The sad fact is that unless we do something drastic, out-of-control population growth will wipe out the gains made by the most ambitious recycling and conservation programs, both here and across the planet.

Portland's fevered efforts to stave off global warming by reducing carbon dioxide began more than two decades ago. And how much progress have we made? None. Zero. Zilch. Every day we dump more planet-threatening gas into the atmosphere. Why? Because at the same time Portland's metro-area population has grown by 42 percent. We cancel out every reduction in CO2 emissions with a gain in CO2 emitters.

Projections say the metro population will grow by another million by 2030 -- even double to 3.85 million by 2060. Do you really think anything we can do will meet the goal of actually reducing total CO2 emissions?

Well, maybe you do. A strange taboo keeps us from talking about the actual cause of global warming and a deadly smorgasbord of other environmental problems. In this supposedly plain-talking era, a former presidential candidate will tell us how Viagra cured his ED, but hardly anybody will talk about what's trashing the Earth. Erectile dysfunction's a bummer. But the fate of our planet is a little more worrisome.

The taboo afflicts most media, including this newspaper. The Oregonian's Earth Day editorial urged support for politicians who back energy-efficient buildings, wind power, public transportation and so on. Everything but population control.

Leaving out the key ingredient can be downright misleading. A March 29 headline read, "Portland lessens its 'carbon footprint.'" But Portland did no such thing. Portlanders may have indeed reduced their per-capita driving by 5 percent over five years, as the story reported, but the metro area's population grew by 8 percent over the same period. The number of vehicles registered in Multnomah County has increased 45 percent since 1990. You do the math.

When it comes to global warming, we're ignoring one simple truth: The Earth doesn't care about per-capita greenhouse-gas production. It's the total amount of CO2 in the air that matters.

But just try to find numbers for the total amount of CO2 produced by Multnomah County, Oregon or the United States. After extensive research, the best ones I could come up with are 9.7 million tons, 12 million tons and 7.08 billion tons. When those go up or down, you'll know whether we're actually gaining or losing.

If anybody will tell you.

Of course, what we do locally won't really have much impact on what happens globally. Portland may have double the per-capita recycling rate, but when I was a kid, typical families had a 1,500-square-foot house, a few basic appliances and one car. Nobody dreamed about air conditioning, power mowers, trash compactors or microwaves. We weren't very environmentally conscious, but we were only 140 million strong in the U.S. The total's now over 304 million.

I bet one 1950s slob still made less of a mess than two 21st-century eco-freaks.

The problem is planet-wide. When my grade-school teacher quizzed me about the world population total, the correct answer was 2 billion. Now the world's cities are growing by 1 million people a week. A century from now we'll clog the planet's pores with something between 9 and 14 billion human beings.

Development compounds the problem. In 1999, each one of 6 billion human beings produced about 1 ton of carbon dioxide annually. And that was when hardly any private citizens in China or India owned cars, air conditioners or central heating systems. Since then, we added nearly 1 billion bodies and increased the average amount each one pollutes. China's now pouring out more than 2 tons of CO2 per person annually, and the United States cooks along at nearly 20. Experts predict that by 2050 global energy use could increase fourfold.

CO2 is just part of the problem. We fixate on global warming, while our rampaging population mows down the rest of the planet's inhabitants behind our backs. When Oregon's offshore salmon stocks collapsed this spring, the blame fell on the Sacramento Delta, where many of the fish originate. A former oceanography professor who works in the area said, "If you want to blame something, it's the increasing population of California. You're putting more pressure on water and everything else."

It's not just fish. The World Wildlife Fund just issued a report announcing that "human activities are causing the most rapid decline in species since the extinction of the dinosaurs." Over the past 35 years, we've crowded out a quarter of all animal species.

The impact of population growth reaches way beyond obvious environmental problems. I'll bet my vasectomy that half the items on Page One and the local-news front in today's newspaper are population related. The paper that arrived the morning I wrote this led with a battle over Willamette Valley development but neglected to mention that population growth fuels 94 percent of Portland's suburban sprawl. The front-page story on soaring gas prices overlooked the soaring population that drives up demand. A political story focused on health care, which has become a problem in part because population growth is overwhelming the existing system. The lead Metro

story raised the possibility of Columbia River bridge tolls as a solution for crippling congestion caused by . . . you guessed it.

Housing. Education. Health care. Transportation. Nearly 40 years ago, Richard Nixon asked, "How will we house the next hundred million Americans? Will we educate and employ such a large number of people? Will our transportation systems move them about as quickly and economically as necessary? How will we provide adequate health care when our population reaches 300 million?"

Well, we've reached it. Conservative estimates put the total at nearly 400 million by 2050, and we're already feeling just the pinch old Tricky Dick predicted.

Population threatens political stability, too. Countries that grow too fast just can't get ahead of their problems, and eventually everything comes crashing down. An annual population growth rate of 2 1/2 percent to 3 percent can produce a 20-fold increase in a century. Of the 20 countries now suffering that kind of growth, 17 are classed as "failed states," countries where political and social systems have disintegrated, fueling famine, civil unrest and war.

Population drives immigration, too. Consider Mexico, which quadrupled in population between 1933 and 1980. The only way it could avoid collapse was by flooding the United States with the excess. Projections call for countries such as El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua to double their populations every 20 years, and many of those people will inevitably find their way to the United States. Ninety-one percent of our population growth over the next 40 years will come from post-2000 immigrants and their descendants.

The non-Anglo nature of that immigration may explain why some Americans think it's racist to mention it. But a sane discussion of immigration's impact on the environment has nothing to do with race. The quality of American life will be forever damaged by the arrival of 100 million immigrants, whether they're Mexican or English.

None of which is to say that we should give up on technological fixes for our most pressing environmental problems. Wind power, fuel-efficient cars and solar energy will delay the Armageddon chickens headed home to our roost. So by all means keep toting those little yellow bins out to the curb. But let's quit deluding ourselves by thinking that technology alone can save the world.

If you want to help, don't waste your time on inconsequential environmental work that treats the symptoms while ignoring the disease. A Portland carpooling project saved -- according to its own chest-thumping claims -- 3,000 tons of CO₂ over five years. That's pathetic -- we could have accomplished the same thing by slowing metro-area population growth by 30 people a year.

The laminated cards you see in hotel bathrooms are the perfect expression of our preoccupation with distracting trivia. "Save Our Planet," they say. How? By picking up your towels so that the maid doesn't send them out for washing. A fine idea, I suppose, although it will do a lot more for the hotel's bottom line than the planet's.

I grabbed one of those cards on a recent trip, and I'm staring at it as I write this. I don't know whether to laugh or cry.

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