

QUAKER ECO-BULLETIN

Information and Action Addressing Public Policy
for an Ecologically Sustainable World

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Emergency Contraception, Abortion, and Population Stabilization: One Friend Addresses some Difficult Issues

by Richard Grossman

The Problem of Too Many People

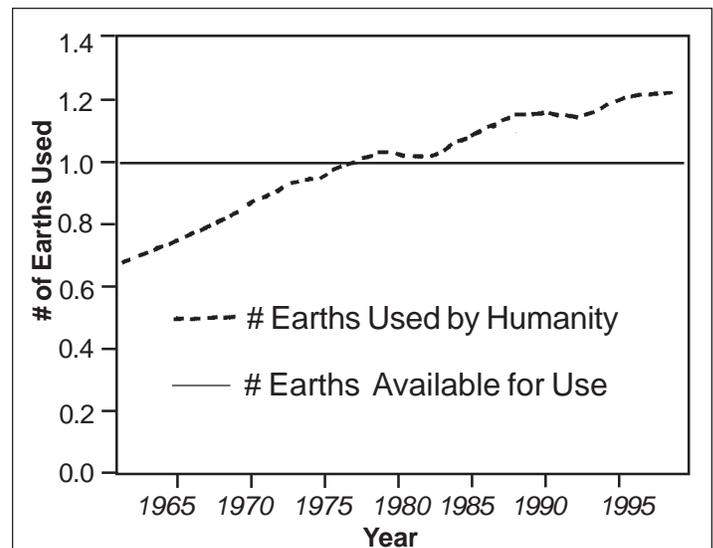
The human species has been very successful, as Stan Becker wrote two years ago in the Quaker Eco-Bulletin. We have “been fruitful and multiplied.” Our population is significantly larger than the Earth can sustainably support. We now would need **one and a quarter** Earths to sustain our numbers and all that we consume and we are still growing! (Wackernagel, et al, 2002 - *see graph*)

This alarming statistic comes from the calculation of our “Ecological Footprint” (EF). Each of us uses an area of land to sustain us – land for our homes, to grow food that we eat, and to dispose of waste. The EF provides a way of calculating a human’s impact on the earth. There is only a finite area of land that is fit for human use, so the EF also permits one to calculate the number of people the planet can sustain without degradation.

“Sustainability requires living within the regenerative capacity of the biosphere. In an attempt to measure the extent to which humanity satisfies this requirement, we use existing data to translate human demand on the environment into the area required for the production of food and other goods, together with the absorption of wastes. Our accounts indicate that human demand may well have exceeded the biosphere’s regenerative capacity since the 1980’s. According to this preliminary and exploratory assessment, humanity’s load corresponded to 70% of the capacity of the global biosphere in 1961, and grew to 120% in 1999.” (Wackernagel, et al, 2002)

Unless our population and consumption do an about-face, our offspring will be faced with a world that is entirely different from the one we live in. Population pressure increases hostility! Concern about overpopulation and its potential to fuel the fires of war is how I chose my life’s work.

Richard Grossman has practiced obstetrics and gynecology in southwestern Colorado for more than a quarter century. One of his goals is to deliver three generations; he has already delivered a number of “grandbabies.” And he is delighted that he and his wife, Gail, are expecting their first grandchild in August. A graduate of 18 years of Quaker education, he left Philadelphia to do his conscientious objector service in northern New Mexico. He is a member of Durango Monthly Meeting; it is there and in FCUN that he finds his spiritual home.



(Wackernagel, et al, 2002, *PNAS*, 99:9266-9271)

This calculation uses the global average per capita area demand (EF). For 1999 that worldwide average EF was 2.3 hectares per person. This is significantly lower than the average EF in industrialized countries such as the United States (9.7 hectares per person), the United Kingdom (5.4 hectares per person) and Germany (4.7 hectares per person) (Living Planet Report 2002). *Note for our readers in the U.S.: 1 hectare = 2.5 acres.*

If all the world used resources at the rate that the U.S. does, we would need more than THREE earths to sustain life.

One Friend’s Concern

Let’s go back forty-plus years. I was at Germantown Friends School, probably 11th grade, when I decided to try to do something about population. I realized that I was not a politician—calling myself politically inept would be more honest. Yet, I wanted to do something to promote world peace. I was impressed when I read about the experiments where rats were housed in small cages with increasing numbers in each cage. The higher the population density the more aggressive the rats became (Calhoun, 1962).

Quaker Eco-Bulletin (QEB) is published bi-monthly as an insert in *BeFriending Creation* by **Quaker Eco-Witness**, a project of **Friends Committee on Unity with Nature (FCUN)**.

Quaker Eco-Witness (QEW) promotes government and corporate policies to help restore and protect Earth's biological integrity. It works within and through the Religious Society of Friends for policies that enable human communities to relate in mutually enhancing ways to the ecosystems of which they are a part. This witness seeks to be guided by the Spirit and grounded in reverence for Earth's communities of life as God's creation.

QEB's purpose is to inform the **QEW** network to advance Friends' witness on government and corporate policy as it relates to the ecosystems that sustains us. Each issue is an article about timely legislative or corporate policy issues affecting our society's relationship to the earth.

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

- Provide background information that reflects the complexity of the issue and is respectful toward other points of view.
- Explain why the issue is a Friends' concern.
- Describe the positions of other faith-based and secular environmental groups on the issue.
- Relate the issue to legislation or corporate policy.
- Provide sources for additional information.

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Because of my interest in science, I could see myself doing something to reduce one of the causes of war—population pressure. That goal has stuck with me through college, medical school, and my choice of obstetrics and gynecology as a specialty.

Some countries have tried different approaches to population stabilization—government-mandated limits on number of children, free access to family planning education and services, and raising the general education and socioeconomic levels of women. As a physician, I know first-hand the practical limits of relying on the most commonly used birth control methods and have concluded that other methods, such as emergency contraception and abortion have important roles to play in reducing the numbers of unwanted births.

Emergency Contraception

Sex is the glue that keeps many relationships going. Fortunately, there are contraceptive methods to separate the relational aspects of sex from the procreational ones. We all know about family planning methods that need to be used before intercourse. Wouldn't it be nice if there were a method that could be used afterwards? Well, there is—it used to be called the "morning after pill." Emergency contraceptive pills are very safe and quite effective, but their full potential hasn't been realized. Some fear that they may work by causing an abortion, but most medical experts say that this is not so.

I recently did a study to determine the proportion of women who requested abortions whose pregnancies could have been prevented by emergency contraception. This included women who used no protection against pregnancy and those who experienced a "condom failure." It turns out that half of the requests for abortion would not have occurred if the women had used EC pills. Emergency contraception has a huge potential to decrease the number of unplanned pregnancies, and the demand for abortions! (Grossman, 2001)

Countrywide there has been a similar finding—part of the decrease in the number of abortions performed seems to be from using EC. It was estimated that 51,000 unplanned pregnancies in the U.S. were prevented by emergency contraception in 2000 (Jones, et al, 2002).

What are these EC pills, and how are they used? They are made of a hormone commonly found in birth control pills, but in a stronger-than-usual dosage. The brand I recommend is Plan B, which consists of two tablets. The instructions say that the woman should take the first as soon as possible after unprotected sex, and the second pill 12 hours later. The most common side effect is nausea, and a few women do actually vomit. There has never been a report of a serious side effect from EC pills! If the woman is already pregnant, they will not cause an abortion, nor will they harm the developing fetus.

The effectiveness of EC pills decreases with the interval since unprotected sex, although they are still effective at 5 days. It is important to take EC pills as soon as possible. Studies have shown that women will take them sooner if they have them on hand in case of need, so advance provision is advisable. Another recent discovery is that both pills can be taken at the same time without an increase in side effects and with the same approximately 90% effectiveness.

If EC pills are so safe, why do you need a prescription to get them? In many countries they are available without prescription—including from a nurse in French high schools! Hopefully the FDA will change its policy soon to make them available over the counter.

The Case for Safe Abortion:

Unfortunately, contraceptive methods, including EC, fail—and people also fail to use family planning. Therefore, women sometimes choose to abort unplanned pregnancies. Being concerned about population and wanting to help couples regulate their fertility, of course I had to consider being an abortion provider. Is abortion taking a life? Does providing safe abortions help save women's lives? Is it the correct action for me to take?

After meditating on the subject of abortion through many meetings for worship, I decided that I should take the risk of being an abortion provider. I am lucky to live in a community where I can talk freely with people who are anti-abortion. My Quaker roots help here; not just in listening to what they say, but in really trying to understand the points they make. Some Friends may not come to the same conclusion as I did about this very divisive issue.

Why is abortion necessary? Almost one half of all pregnancies in the U.S. are unplanned. People believe that most of these conceptions occur because people don't plan ahead and don't use contraception. Certainly, this is true for some unplanned pregnancies, but many are because of family planning method failure. Every method has a significant failure rate, unfortunately. Couples choose to have smaller families now, and use contraception for a large proportion of their fertile lives. It has been calculated that the average American woman will have 1.8 unplanned pregnancies in her lifetime (Jones, et al, 2002).

Each year just over a million pregnancies are aborted in the U.S. I am happy that this number is decreasing. In the 30 years since the US Supreme Court legalized abortion, about 42 million abortions have been done. If no abortions had been done in these three decades, the U.S. population, now 290 million, would be over 332 million!

There are reasons that I perform abortions other than my concern about population. If I didn't, someone would do the abortions in a back alley. Women used to die from illegal abortions. The people who did the abortions abused women, and women were also abused by the system that made them seek care from quacks.

I listen to the stories of women who come to me requesting abortions. Often I learn about a side of life I would rather ignore—the young mother who was raped by her uncle, the student whose partner's condom broke, the woman in her 40's who thought that she was no longer fertile.

January 22nd, 2003, was the 30th anniversary of the Supreme Court decision that made abortion legal in all 50 states. Religious conservatives are impinging on that right and it is now endangered. If the President Bush has an opportunity to make an appointment to the Supreme Court, it is likely to be someone who is against legal abortion. Abortion may become illegal again. Not only will women start dying again from clandestine abortions, but we can also expect the U.S.'s population to grow significantly faster.

A Perspective to Encourage Dialogue

Recognizing that the subject of abortion has not been fully seasoned among all Friends, I offer my experience and skills in language and communication in furthering that process. Having seen how high-level abstractions can lead to confusion and misunderstanding in discussions of highly charged issues such as abortion, I'd like to present another way to approach this topic, a way that might foster Spirit-led consideration of a divisive issue.

Let's think about an actual young woman who is talking with her doctor about having an abortion. It's okay to picture her as being a lot like someone we know—because chances are she *is* someone we know. Maybe her contraceptive method didn't work this time. Or maybe she didn't have access to contraception. Whatever the reason, it isn't relevant now. My sense is that it is unlikely that she is concerned about the impact of her decision on world population. In any event, she is facing an intensely personal crisis; if this door is closed to her she will likely seek another, even at the risk of her life.

Then let's think about her doctor. Like Richard Grossman, she or he may have entered this specialization partly out of a desire to help stabilize world population. But once a decision is made and the pregnancy either is or isn't terminated, the motivation behind it really isn't important, because the doctor could just as well have acted

for other reasons—such as compassion for troubled women like this, or concern for those unwanted children who become victims of abuse.

Similarly, we are free to look at the concrete fact of millions of abortions taking place around the world every year and put any one of a variety of spins on it, without in any way altering the reality. This is not to say that it doesn't matter what we think. But given two plausible ways of framing an issue, why not go with the one that invites the most dialogue?

Is dialogue furthered by a projection of a much higher population without all the abortions? It might be misinterpreted that the end justifies the means. Rather than emphasizing the population stabilization aspect, wouldn't it be just as true and far more effective to frame access to abortion in the context of family planning services that are organized around preventing unwanted pregnancies?

If universally available contraception is our best chance of stabilizing world population, the best way to promote it is to offer people the hope for better quality of life through smaller families. Making safe, legal abortion available as a necessary, but reluctantly exercised, backup to fallible contraception can make that hope a realistic one.

Louis Cox,
FCUN Publications Coordinator

Bush Decision Increases Occasion of Abortion

Last year, President Bush refused to send \$34 million to the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) to help fund international family planning, even though Congress had approved this contribution. The reason given for the denial of funds was the allegation that the UNFPA supported coercive abortion and involuntary sterilization in China—even though a US government investigation revealed no evidence that the UNFPA supported or participated in these practices. Presumably he withheld the contribution to appease those in his constituency who equate family planning with abortion.

Since abortion is lawful in this country, his decision makes no legal sense. Since family planning reduces unwanted pregnancies and, therefore, the occasion of abortion, his decision makes no logical sense. But beyond the senselessness, the decision has tragically ironic consequences—it will **increase** the incidence of abortions.

The UNFPA estimates that the \$34 million would have prevented about 2 million unwanted pregnancies.

Of this number, about 800,000 of these pregnancies will be terminated through abortion. And that's not all. As a result of these preventable pregnancies, 4,700 mothers will die, another 60,000 will contract serious illness, and more than 77,000 infants and children will die.

Jane Roberts of California and Lois Abraham of New Mexico independently came up with the same plan to ask U.S. citizens to counter the anti-woman, anti-child policies of the Bush administration and help the 350 million women around the world who lack sufficient access to family planning resources. "34 Million Friends of UNFPA" is a movement to offset the shortfall of funding through individual donations. If 34 million Americans each send just one dollar to the UNFPA, the loss will be made up, many lives will be saved, and hundreds of thousands of abortions prevented. To contribute, go to <www.unfpa.org> or send a check to:
U.S. Committee for UNFPA
220 E. 42nd St., Suite 2800
New York, NY 10017

Terrorism is a more underhanded way to restrict abortion. Abortion clinics are routinely attacked by arson, stink bombs and bio-terrorism threats. There have been many shootings, with the assassination of several abortion doctors and clinic workers. Most of the terrorism has been at the hands of religious fanatics, similar to those of 9-11, except that these anti-abortion zealots are not Muslims.

Conclusion

Abortion is here to stay—whether legally performed by a physician or illegally by a quack. I hope, for the sake of women who are determined to have one, that abortion remains legal and freely available. If legal abortion becomes more limited, women will return to back alley abortions, which will result in many needless deaths of women. Like preventing war, it is best to take away the cause for abortion. Emergency contraception has the potential to significantly reduce the occasion for abortion—but a woman needs to know about it before the emergency arises.

Friends, I believe, should seek a world where every child born is wanted, provided for, and loved. We should also seek a world whose human population does not stretch the limits of its ecological support system—God's Creation.

What Friends Can Do:

- 1) Inform yourself about the capacity of the earth to sustain the human population.
- 2) Check your own Ecological Footprint at www.myfootprint.org.
- 3) Lobby to make Emergency Contraception (EC) methods more available. <www.not-2-late.com>
- 4) Lobby to prevent further erosion of women's right to abortion <www.saveroe.org>.

- 5) Friends can help people in developing countries control their fertility, and help prevent the demand for abortions by giving money to the United Nations Population Fund (*see box above*).

After several years of consideration, FCUN Friends were able to come to unity on the brochure entitled "Toward Taking Away the Occasion of Abortion".

—Available from FCUN

For Further Information:

- Wackernagel, M., et al. **Tracking the Ecological Overshoot of the Human Economy.** *Proc. Natl. Acad. Sci. USA*, Vol. 99, Issue 14, 9266-9271, July 9, 2002. <www.pnas.org>
Living Planet Report 2002 <www.panda.org/news_facts/publications/general/livingplanet/index.cfm>
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Grossman, R. 2001. **Emergency Contraceptive Pills Can Prevent Abortion.** *Am J Public Health* 91(7):1137-8.
Jones, R. K., et al. **Contraceptive Use Among U.S. Women Having Abortions in 2000-2001.** *Perspectives on Sexual and Reproductive Health*, Vol. 34, Number 6, November/December 2002. <www.agi-usa.org/pubs/journals/3429402.html>.
Toward Taking Away the Occasion of Abortion, Friends Committee on Unity with Nature - Populations Concerns <www.fcun.org/population/abortion.html>
Emergency Contraception Website <www.not-2-late.com>
Planned Parenthood <www.saveroe.org>
Alan Guttmacher Institute - a nonprofit organization focused on sexual and reproductive health research, policy analysis and public education <www.agi-usa.org>
United Nations Population Fund <www.unfpa.org/support/index.htm>