

## LISTENING TO WOMEN

# Women are telling us what has to happen if the human species is to survive

by Dr. Michael Tobias

### A Balancing Act of Human Nature

The human population surpassed 6.4 billion as of 2004 and, according to the Population Reference Bureau, is growing by some 80 million per year. As a species humans have succeeded in the most outrageous, embarrassing and dangerous ways, fanning out unfettered across every last quadrant, inhabiting biological space not even remotely suited to the runaway pressure our behavior and volitions have long exerted. Biological success is normally noted by the strength and pertinacity of its fertility trends, shoots and offspring that survive the rigors of day-to-day evolution. Among creatures that reproduce sexually, that typically means that males and females have achieved a functional balancing act that allows them to perpetuate their species. Species that will, nonetheless, go extinct sooner or later. In the case of *Homo sapiens*, over the past 117,000 years that we are known to have been around, I want to believe that such success is possible. That our finer traits-proclivities favoring restraint and tenderness over a muscle-man mentality-are collectively within our grasp, even if the anthropological record as yet yields a mixed review.

However bloodstained and gruesome much of our history is, there are other countless harmonies, artistic and spiritual truths, and existing cultures, individuals, and a few world leaders, which lend to our legacy a humanity, time-honored, compassionate, and altruistic. And these are the models of sustainability which, today, the world urgently needs in every domain.

### The Biological Bottom-Line

No one knows exactly how many people the Earth can hold. That said, scientists are in vast concurrence that, as a species, we have outstripped available natural resources, and are currently in a downward spiral of self-destruction that appears to be carrying with us hundreds of thousands of other species, and possibly several genera, families, and orders. The house of cards upon whose frail edifice we now impinge like few known catastrophes in the annals of life, is collapsing over the course of but a few human generations. This human action has been rightly termed the sixth great extinction spasm in the Earth's 4.2 billion years of budding life. Seen from the trenches of family planning, demographers have voiced considerable disarray when it comes to formulating numbers that can remotely size up universal patterns of human fertility that can predict a sure closure at the top of our Everest. As with any weather forecaster, unpredictable changes are normal. And thus we see a spread atop that demographic zenith, from 8.5 (the most modest United Nations prediction) to 12, even 13 billion humans by the end of this century.

The discrepancy between 8.5 and 13 billion tells of a frightening window on the workings of people, and the vulnerability of all other species against the tide of human non-renewable consumption. Our impact is at once understood, and not. Because the actual number of species on Earth is unknown, to within a significant multiplier, possibly even a power of ten, if one includes all potential species and sub-species based upon such simple methodologies as five-minute bird counts, or soil and sea samples, or scat analysis. But what is clear is that everywhere there teems a multiplicity of organisms that have no marriage or birth certificates. And whose deaths are not noticed. Even when the famed Passenger Pigeon went from numbering several billion, to one-her name was Martha, and she died in confinement in the Cincinnati Zoo in 1914-

ornithological pundits scratched their heads in amazement. Today, the great sadness is the relative lack of amazement. This generation has become used to the idea of extinction. There could be no worse threat than this psychic numbing, this indifference to the biological bottom-line, an inertia that fears all change, will take no risks, is unable to mend wounds or even heal itself; that remains paralyzed.

While disappearing big cats and global warming may make the cover of Time Magazine and National Geographic (mid-August, 2004), effectively translating the bad news so that our species might act to stop the deaths remains a daunting task. It is too clear by now that we alone are wiping out everything that possesses the slightest utility; or appears to be in the way of our "progress." In that respect, we are not unlike the 60-mile long swathe of Argentine ants last seen descending on Melbourne Australia. They too are recent invaders, strategizing, destroying, emitting noxious gasses, for purposes of biological conquest. There may be over 22,000 species of ants on earth; a trillion or more individuals, their weight taken together equaling or exceeding that of 6.4 billion humans. But for all of their primeval minions and war-mongering, they have achieved balance, recognized their queens, have left the Earth intact. Whereas we have not quite figured it out, or not yet.

Even when our numbers were as few as 100,000, we were capable of driving to extinction a vast range of other species, as evidenced by the early human history of New Zealand. Hence, when "experts" argue over the elixir of sustainability, and predicate various designs of carrying capacity as defined by consumer habits, they too easily ignore the very fickleness and unpredictability of human nature, our genius, our charm, our lethality. The bad news cascades in so many myriads of jumbled distress. On every front priorities scream out for our attention. But prioritizing amongst so many imperatives is tricky, at best. Philanthropic giving finds itself confronted with too many fires to put out. Too many ideals competing for our time, energy and wealth depreciation. Whether to give money directly to AIDS patients or to AIDS research; whether to save the last national parks in Mali or in Angola; to provide less expensive condoms in Ethiopia or Russia; dictionaries to elementary schools, or vaccines to children living in poverty in the U.S. But there is a common ground of understanding emerging-at the grassroots-of much that can be done to stabilize our ecological crisis, and it is not complicated science.

## Compassionate Demographic Transition?

At the heart of all public policy and decision making is the looming truth of our population explosion which, in another context (voiced by Boris Pasternak) has resembled a train barreling through the dark night with its headlights turned inward. When I wrote my book *World War III: Population and the Biosphere at the End of the Millennium* in 1994, it seemed possible that our species could reach 12-to-15 billion people by the 22nd century. Indeed, in my interviews, even the State Family Planning Commissioner of China, Madame Peng, admitted that her country could hit 2 billion at the rate it was going, notwithstanding the much ballyhooed success of the one-child family scenario. With growing economic stardom, China's rising middle-class decided it could afford to have 2 and 3 children per family. In the mid-1990s, the American standard of living translated into approximately 4.5 hectares-worth of arable land per person. By such arithmetic, several planet Earths would be needed to contain the development imperative suggested by the Brundtland Commission. In India, despite the success stories in the South (in the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu) most of the country remained well above a total fertility rate of 3 children per family, while correspondingly, water, forests and arable land were fast disappearing. In 1993, the rate at which species were going extinct, or becoming threatened throughout the world, was unprecedented. Nobody knew, in fact, how many creatures were disappearing (and they still don't). My research led me to believe- depending on geography-it varied between 70 to nearly 800 species per day.

And meanwhile, nearly 1 billion children went to bed hungry every night, and 2 billion people struggled without proper sanitation, or access to electricity. While over 300 million couples could not get adequate medical care or family planning services. And civil wars were erupting across the planet. Old enmities remained. Debacles were escalating. People were depressed in numbers never imagined. Anti-depressants were being handed out at schools. Suicide rates among the young were up. As well as violent crimes. Los Angeles, which boasts of having more resident environmentalists than any city in the world, also was said to host more psychiatrists per square mile than any city. The data was horrible.

Now, ten years later, certain aspects of the data have changed. The bad news is there, more than ever. To take but one recent example, in startling findings by British scientist Dr David Molden, a researcher with the International Water Management

Institute (IWMI) looking at how we are going to feed growing human populations that are unsustainably consuming fresh water, it appears that the western-style high meat diet consumes approximately 5,000 litres of water per day, versus 1,000-2,000 litres per day consumed by vegetarians in developing countries.

America adds some 3 million residents per year, while the country's habitat, air, soil, water resources and social services—from parks to schools to hospitals—suffer as a result of consumptive habits, and our very real, or imagined needs. Even the nation's democratic principles are eroded as corporations and powerful media manipulation target the largest numbers of people, seeking to multiply "hits" with glossy digitized imagery and pasteurized sound-bites. Young people are particularly vulnerable. Not only to product allure, but to the dangers inherent in global industrialization. It sounds corny, even prudish to admit it. Yet, the data is impossible to ignore: countless toxic chemicals effect children and the elderly with startling efficiency. And the laws to curb such risks do not ordinarily comply with good science, or even common sense, for they, too, are held hostage by politics and massive transnational corporate agendas which, in turn, feed on burgeoning populations. From the corporate perspective, pro-natalism is a fundamental positive. Consumers make the world go round.

Common law—the Original law of the commons by which each individual recognizes and adheres to an inherent carrying capacity of the collective—is fast deteriorating.

In spite of all this moribund summing up, at the beginning of a new century, where a fresh dawn would be so much easier to tout, there are indeed signs that more and more people are looking for positive change, and that organizations in country after country—whether government or private—are beginning to wake up to the needs of the world. Socially responsible investing is one automatic turn-about, both for corporations and for their stakeholders. Every child, with an allowance; each classroom has the potential to become an investor with clout; to use personal economic choices as leverage towards a more sustainable world.

Such human choices are also experiencing other, spectacular changes. In no more critical arena is this so than in the trenches of family planning, where the fuel for destruction, or creation—in the guise of human numbers—is moderated.

## **Women Held Hostage to Politics**

We now know that women everywhere want smaller families, often no more than two children. But many are prevented from realizing those wants. Forty-four percent of all countries currently show evidence of having achieved replacement-sized families—families of two parents and two children, no more. Yet, fifty-six percent of all nations have not gotten there though many show promise of doing so, to varying degrees. None of this was quite so clear a decade ago.

Most of those remaining countries are in the so called developing world. India still gives birth to one million people every week. Several countries are still seeing TFRs (Total Fertility Rates) exceeding 6, even 7. Some other nations, like the United States, are right where you would least expect them to be: in rising fertility crisis, particularly given the high-impact consumerist trends manifested in the U.S. The United States is also in a state of emergency because of its current political conservatism, which threatens to topple *Roe v. Wade*, the Supreme Court decision enabling American women to seek and have safe abortions. In the U.S., forty-three percent of all women will have an abortion by the time they are 20 years old. Such statistics vary from country to country but what is clear today is that without abortion, not one nation which has achieved population stabilization (a two-child family) would have succeeded at lowering its birthrate. No one supports abortion as a form of contraception. But at present, the technology, and the contraceptive cafeteria of choice, have not engendered universally more enlightened infrastructures to make abortions unnecessary. Abortions will continue. Abstinence alone is not a realistic policy. Nor has the human consensus regarding non-violence and how it might be optimized, sorted out the priorities which would include not only mothers and their fetuses, but also all other life forms, the majority of which continue to end up as pairs of shoes, as gelatin, glue, briefcases, hamburger patties or Mandarin duck.

Not only is *Roe v. Wade* under threat in the U.S., but also *Griswold v Connecticut*, involving the very right of women to use birth control in this country.

In the meantime, religion and male dominance continues to dis-empower women, one billion of whom have never had a

choice about their own bodies or destinies. Yet it appears quite likely, as former Director of Research at the World Bank Lawrence Summers, pointed out in 1993, that every year of female education-not male, but female-would reduce that woman's fertility by some 10%.

Women themselves have told us so, in so many ways. That little piece of pearly wisdom, by itself, might well save our species from ruin if we make the appropriate and timely investments.

In Mexico, the national family planning organization, MexFam, has sent cadres of youths out on to the busy thoroughfares and into schools to demonstrate safe sex methods in the most graphic and life-saving ways. With music, skits, cartoons, humor, and gritty reality, Mexican family planning professionals have shown stamina, given the Vatican's stance on artificial contraceptives. All with the support of parents and the government. The Catholic Church would have to excommunicate millions of Mexican women if it dared to contravene in a revolution that started in the early 1970s in that country and to date has succeeded in holding back at least 30 million unwanted children from being born.

In East Los Angeles, thanks to such programs as the Promotoros and Planned Parenthood, women who had eleven children are now seeing their daughters giving birth to no more than 3. Throughout Indonesia, roadside stalls are likely to have numerous over-the-counter contraceptives for sale. In Nigeria, a few brothels are now awarded medals of honor if they effectively promote safe sex. All over the world, women are speaking out. This is a revolution occurring among the one gender that understands where the real burden lies; that has not turned its back on the planet, and has taken hold of its destiny, or is working at it, in order to save the family, the community, and-indirectly-one country after another. The women are pioneers who know, if instinctively, that values, economies, and ecosystems are tied together. And that controlling one's fertility is the linchpin to sustainability. Globally, the woman's courage has risen to the occasion of ecological and personal crisis, has become a science, and it plays out demographically as the most important challenge to policy making in the 21st century.

## Change Can-And Does-Happen Overnight

Paul Ehrlich, too often thought of merely as a Malthusian pessimist, recently told us that change can, and does happen overnight. It happened in Berlin, in the Soviet Union, in India's Panchayat local governing boards, where the prominence of women was legally vouchsafed. The Family Planning Association of India, led by the legendary Lady Wadia, continues to transform tens-of-thousands of communities, linking woman's health, family welfare, and the environment. And Conservation International, based in Washington D.C., responsible for saving tens-of-millions of acres in over two dozen designated "hotspots," has developed critical programs in places like the Yucatan and Madagascar, involving indigenous peoples, family planning, and ecology.

We must refine our international politics to encompass such links, or risk losing our constituencies, whatever and whoever they may be. As Bixby Professor Malcolm Potts of the University of California at Berkeley has put it, "I think it's more important to be able to control your fertility than it is to go to the ballot box or to have a free press." (He goes on to add that he wants them both, but that without a woman's right to choose, there is little hope of fostering any kind of democracy.) The point is, one can have both, and does have both in more and more countries. Thailand, whose King has written a best-selling biography of the life of a dog, and who is promoting Buddhist adoption of lost puppies, has also seen his country go from a fertility rate of six children to two. The same has occurred throughout the Pacific Rim and in Europe. The European Union-whose national anthem is Beethoven's "Ode to Joy"-is seeing a birthrate of 1.4. Its biggest dilemma will be to find a way to support an aging population that is outside the workforce and spends its days drinking CafŽ Mochas and listening to Beethoven (not a bad scenario). At least it will not be a breeding ground for unwanted children or terrorists. Note, as Malcolm Potts points out in the new feature documentary, "No Vacancy": Osama Bin Laden was the 17th child of a man with 11 wives and 55 children. That is a formula for disenchanting youth.

And yet, the United States, the very nation that has embraced the crusade of wiping out terrorism, has failed to assert the crucial link between family planning and stable democracies, a situation underscored by Planned Parenthood President Gloria Feldt who spoke at the Democratic National Convention in July of this year, showing formal support on behalf of the organization for John Kerry, the first time Planned Parenthood has ever endorsed a presidential candidate. Just two weeks

prior to the Democratic Convention, Bush had announced that his administration would be withholding funds to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) for the third year in a row. "Make no mistake," said Feldt. "This [the Bush] administration will always choose anti-family planning extremism over women's health programs here and around the world." (Agence France Presse, July 17, 2004) Writes Planned Parenthood, "The Bush administration has made clear its goal of overturning Roe v. Wade and denying women in this country and around the world access to safe, legal abortion at all stages of a pregnancy. What has been less visible, but equally deadly, is this administration's efforts to undermine access to effective voluntary family planning methods. An emerging campaign against family planning is underway across the country and in international arenas, led by the Bush administration and its allies in Congress and state legislatures." (see [www.plannedparenthood.org](http://www.plannedparenthood.org)) Despite the present U.S. government campaign, outside the United States, from Brazil to Iran (one of the countries now demonized by the Bush administration) revolutions in family planning are taking place. In Western Kenya and Northern Ghana; in Mexico and in Italy the same pattern of fewer and fewer children is occurring.

Still, there remain strange difficulties. As Robert Gillespie, President of Population Communication, points out, smaller families mean more consumption, not less, because they are able to afford Western-style consumer patterns. This is an ecological paradox for which no answer, as yet, exists, except to acknowledge that the population explosion is defined by its impact, which, in turn, revolves around the manner in which wealth-to whatever degree-is expended. Money spent wisely, sustainably, can be a great force for nature, and for human rights.

In Mumbai, India, wealthy Jain landlords are now designating certain rental properties, such as entire condo complexes, as "meat free." The logic (aside from the ethical consideration, basic to Jain beliefs, which comports with the consensual opinion of the ecological damage wrought upon the planet by the human consumption of flesh) is the comparable legal status of smoke-free areas. Say the Jains: Why should their vegetarian tenants be forced to endure the odors of meat and fish being cooked by neighbors in the same building when it is so morally and physically repugnant to them? And hence, increasingly, only vegetarian tenants will be encouraged.

And who, ten years ago, would have imagined a cover story in the L.A. Times which read, "Automakers Getting a Taste for Vegan Values," (Sharon Bernstein, p.1, August 23rd, 2004) in which Bernstein writes, "Toyota Motor Corp. is so attuned to the sensibilities of these so-called green consumers that the company doesn't even offer leather seats for the popular Prius."

## A New Human Nature

It is, precisely, the two-pronged approach of stabilizing population by listening to women, and lowering consumption that will recognize the light: humanity can stop the continued degradation of the biosphere, whilst upholding the rights of women and children as the champions of a New Nature. A natural renaissance on Earth, not unlike the spiritual world proposed by Nikos Kazantzakis in *Saviors of God* or the ideals promulgated by such societies as those of the Jains, the Toda of the Nilgiris, the Bishnoi of Rajasthan, the Karen of Myanmar, the Inner Badui of Indonesia, or the Drukpa of Bhutan. A world, in other words, that embraces the motto-"Every child a wanted child." And, I would add, every individual, a wanted individual.

What must not be ignored, at our peril, is the difference between a world of 8.5 billion, and 13 billion people, given that one American consumes at least 30 times the annual amount of materials of an East Indian, or Ethiopian; and that our global consumption little distinguishes between the rich and the poor, when it comes to the destruction of habitat, or greenhouse gasses, and hence, the extermination of wild species, and untold numbers of individuals. Even at 8.5 billion, the destruction is unimaginable, as it now is. We are trouble, and it has to be acknowledged that all of us must commit in our lifetimes to solving the behavioral impact which we alone have unleashed upon mother nature. In just one area of human consumption, approximately 45-to-50 billion animals are consumed each year, at present, for food and for various absolutely unessential byproducts. That's 45-to-50 billion animals we know about. And let it be stated for the record that those unimaginable billions of sensitive creatures whose genotypes are scarcely different from our own, and who may, indeed, feel more than we do, are tortured in any number of hideous ways prior to their deaths. And this is termed "economic progress" or, the "human prerogative" or, "human superiority." Whatever it is, it is not human survival. And it certainly does not rhyme with that tenderness between a mother and her young. Any mother. And thus, our truly abominable crimes against nature do not recommend our species, although we have in every society, and virtually every art form, revered, or aspired to those

qualities of the female and the mother.

Such discrepancies aside, in defense of hope and free will, and the essence of human goodness, it is not evolution which condemns us, or forces us to slaughter animals or destroy vulnerable forest ecosystems, or have 55 children. Only our own personal choices can do that.

Clearly, women have shouldered the fertility burden throughout the centuries because the men have opted out; have renounced responsibility in too many instances. Now, women are speaking their minds and their hearts, and what they are telling us reads of a remarkable revolution in sustainability. (Bob Gillespie amends this hoorah by reminding me of the shopping mall syndrome. But men are no less-and possibly more-guilty of such concentrated consumption. Men buy fewer shoes and make-up, but they consume by weight more meat and thus, are responsible for a broader swath of killing. It seems likely that men are responsible for a much larger ecological footprint, on average, than women). However one debates the shopping mall syndrome, women are providing a window on the soul of our species like never before and have passed a brilliant torch from country to country.

Greece, site of this year's Olympic Games, may well be the ultimate metaphor for this revolution. Her women today are counted as among the most outspoken and eloquent in history, as they were in Homer's time. The country's TFR, at 1.2, measures among the lowest in the world. Like nearby Bulgaria, Greece is losing population. From approximately 11 million today, she is expected to number 10,400,00 in the year 2025, and 9,700,000 in 2050. Her rate of natural increase (birth rate minus death rate) is 0.0%. This all means that Greek women have taken hold of their own lives, in a manner which has historically been denied women in country after country. Greece also retains one of the largest rural populations of any major Western power, which translates into an environmental legacy (and cultural tradition) that is alive and well (though not without its own complex array of profound problems-the treatment of dogs in Athens and on the islands, and the abuse of the sea by many fishermen, to take but a few examples).

But the women of Greece, and of the world, have uttered a crystal clear rallying cry that is both personal and ecological, and one that will forever transform their lives, and the lives of all who know them; their communities, and their nations. Women are setting an example, whether in a slum in Mumbai, or a high rise condominium complex in Singapore. Whether Catholic in Brazil, Muslim in Morocco or Buddhist in Bangkok; Jew or Russian Orthodox; Australian Aborigine or Native American. Women are telling us what has to happen if the human species is to survive, and if the magical, gentle creation of which we are but a humble part, is to survive with us.

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