

WEE REQUESTED BY DAVID
ARMSTRONG 387A

Immigration and the environment

John Hyde

If you believe that Spaceship Earth is doomed by the exponential growth of humankind to so pollute the bio-sphere that it will die, then sparsely populated Australia should accept more migrants and refugees from populous nations. After all, that is where we would expect the bio-sphere to start dying first. We should settle them in the hills around our capital cities where, in due course, they will buy Volvo cars and Alsatian dogs and lecture us about over-crowding in the Blue Mountains, the Dandenongs etc.

The conviction that pollution levels increase inexorably with increases in human population is, however, open to challenge. One objection to it is that some of the most widely publicised examples of environmental degradation are associated with sparse populations---for instance, in Brazil, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Uganda and Zaire. What these countries have in common is not overcrowding, but illiberal governments and poverty, and both of those misfortunes really are the enemies of the environment.

While there is no reason to accept refugees from high population density, there are two good reasons to increase Australia's population density by accepting more refugees. First there is self interest: immigration is likely to improve the functioning of our economy---particularly if the newcomers do not come from unionised workforces. I admit that this argument is disputed and I will return to it. Then there is an altruistic reason: by allowing people to flee from badly-governed, poor countries to liberal-democratic, rich countries, we certainly improve their lives, even if we do not improve our own.

Nevertheless, the average collectivist Greenie does not want to increase immigration. To avoid admitting that it is either greed or prejudice which causes him to exclude others from his version of the good life, he has found a big word with which to confound his critics and assuage his guilt. It is 'anthropocentric'.

Greenies apply 'anthropocentric' disparagingly to people who see human welfare as the prime reference point against which to assess policies. When it suits them, they assert that flora and fauna must be protected by force if necessary from contact with (other) men, irrespective of the human cost of so doing. They often sound sincere, indeed, once a Greenie almost offered to join the refugees---thus putting his moral position almost beyond doubt.

Since the Fall, mankind has tended to keep an eye on self interest and to oppose the anti-immigration stance of some Greens on ethical grounds alone might be fruitless. Fortunately, there are also excellent material grounds for questioning the wisdom of low levels of immigration. One of these is that an increasing population is likely to improve the care that the Australian environment receives.

Before proceeding to discuss the effect of population on the Australian ecosystem, however, it might be wise to establish a sense of proportion. We should bear in mind that, even when it comes to making a mess, man remains puny beside nature---remember the devastation caused by the Mt St Helens volcano and by several recent cyclones.

It is true that, if there were to be more people in Australia, greater use would then be made of our land, sea and air and more waste would be generated here. However, as we have already noted, degraded environments are by no means restricted to areas of dense population, indeed a tendency toward the reverse may be the case. As there is no common measure of environmental loss, it is impossible to say whether the loss of forests and the degradation of grazing lands or the effect of sewerage in rivers is a worse catastrophe.

Most people would agree, however, that it is not wise to turn grazing land into deserts and streams and lakes into sewers. Their opinion is not changed by being told that a few species, can survive only in deserts and others only in murky water. Their criterion is mankind's ultimate welfare which they believe does not lie in fouling its own nest. That is, most people take an anthropocentric view of such tragedies as the turning of both the Sahel and Lake Michigan into virtual deserts.

Lake Michigan differs importantly from the Sahel, however, in that something effective has been done to restore it to a condition that allows its wildlife to return. Many similar contrasts can be drawn: The Bison is effectively protected from hunters but the African Elephant is not. The Thames has been brought back to life but the River Don is still dying. Singapore harbour has been cleaned up but Bombay has not. And so on. Wealthy nations look after their environments better than poor nations. In particular, wealthy nations look after common property, such as air and moving water, better than poor nations can---'better' being defined from an anthropocentric point of view but, nonetheless, a point of view that benefits other inhabitants of the

ecosystem. The wealthy nations all enjoy market economies and nearly all are democratic.

What is more, there is more to a 'good' environment than preserving nature. Nature may be improved by man and often is. The risk lies in grand schemes that cannot easily be reversed. The verdant Nile valley, apart from some of the delta, is the creation of man. So, for that matter, is much of the verdant part of the Murray valley---our worry there is that salinity may prevent us from retaining and improving upon the gains we have already made. Both improvement and rectification are investments which cost money now for rewards later---they are assisted by a strong economy.

There is some doubt---recently reinforced by Senator Peter Walsh---about the short term effects of migration upon living standards. There should be no doubt, however, that the cross fertilisation resulting from immigration is beneficial in the long run. History is replete with examples of material abundance following waves of new settlers. And one has only to look around the world to observe that when man has wealth that is surplus to immediate needs he uses it to care for the beautiful and for the distant future.

A larger Australian population will, it is true, make more sewerage, but it will also preserve and build for the next generation---make the deserts bloom, plant trees and recycle its own waste. All that is necessary to ensure that people, in fact, do this, is to maintain a system of private property rights and governments that listen to popular opinion.

Some Greenies might complain that this is an anthropocentric view of nature, because indeed it is. It values the trees and animals because of their potential use to mankind but when discussing issues such as migration it does not place the interests of trees and animals before those of people. What is more, I am confident that Gaii worshippers have nothing to worry about: most refugees and migrants will be at least as careful with the environment as are current Australians, and much more careful than they could afford to be in the countries they have left.

John Hyde is Executive Director of the Australian Institute for Public Policy

ENDS