

# HAITI'S PROBLEMS, AND THEIR LESSONS

## An NPG Forum Paper

By Walter Youngquist

Few people have as much sympathy as I do for the people of Haiti, especially for the children, for I saw their desperate plight years before the earthquake. Led by the U.S., many nations have now committed to solving Haiti's problems. The fact is that the immediate relief problems and earthquake casualties would be much less with a smaller population. The size of population now, with the scale of the problems it creates, leads to an increasingly chaotic situation. More population exacerbates any efforts needed to solve humanity's problems, anywhere, be they immediate or long term.

We state we will rebuild Haiti to better than before – buildings to resist earthquakes, and feed everyone an adequate diet. A growing population makes this an endless task. People, politicians especially, have little grasp of realities. Promises are made with no basis of fact. Haiti can never be self-sustaining without a **huge reduction in population**. I have been there and seen 9.2 million people jammed into an area half-mountainous, only a bit larger than Malheur County, Oregon (9,926 square miles), and the worst erosion I have ever seen in the 70-plus countries I have visited. When I saw Haiti more than 20 years ago, even then nearly all aspects of what might be a life-sustaining environment had been destroyed from overpopulation. Bill Clinton, U.S. special envoy to Haiti, wants to re-forest Haiti – nice trick with virtually no topsoil left, and it takes 40-plus years to grow a forest even on fertile soil. In the meantime what do people use for fuel – other biomass sorely needed to impede erosion and to be put into Haiti's impoverished dirt? The reason forests are now 98% gone is that when I was there, even then people were left to digging out tree roots to make charcoal for fuel.

No amount of aid money can make topsoil, the only basic resource Haiti initially had. Nature has to do it over many centuries. In his 2007 already-classic study, *Dirt: The Erosion of Civilizations*, David Montgomery states that, worldwide, topsoil is being lost many times faster than it is being formed. But the populations of Haiti and the world keep growing, the world at the rate of approximately 80 million a year.

Without population reduction, Haiti's problems will remain. But in the many articles now on Haiti, overpopulation and the loss of topsoil are never mentioned, although both of these most basic problems are plainly obvious for all to recognize. In terms of physical standard of living there is, with rare special circumstances, an inverse relationship between size of population and the environmental resources to sustain the population. Haiti is no exception but a devastating classic example. Haiti can never become self-sustaining in the foreseeable future, given the size of its population now, much less one that keeps growing, and its nearly total loss of topsoil. More imported food is not the answer, but that is what the U.S. and the world are asked to do, which, in the longer term, just makes matters worse. Population reduction is the only answer, for, as is the conclusion of one concerned citizen's organization, "Whatever your cause, it is a lost cause without population control."

Nevertheless, Haiti's population keeps growing, and is projected to be nearly 70% larger by 2050! Population problems are home-grown and must be solved at home. We did not cause overpopulation in Haiti. We can provide means for family planning but the population problem is theirs to solve. We cannot do it for them, and it is not to be solved by exporting people to other lands, for the problem of overpopulation is now nearly worldwide.

In the 27 countries now apparently on permanent international food welfare, providing more food without addressing the dual-intertwined problems of population growth and loss of fertile topsoil means ultimately there are more people caught in the next disaster, whatever that may be – hurricanes, floods, drought, or poor harvest and famine. Food aid without population control is futile; food aid combined with a reduction in population makes sense. Sooner or later realities arrive. Many will do so this century, as has already happened in Haiti. The earthquake simply more clearly exposed them.

Some competent people have seen the problem for years. In 1978, Lester Brown's book *The Twenty Ninth Day* has the subtitle *Accommodating human needs and*

numbers to the earth's resources, and Brown carries this concern throughout his study. The late human biologist Garrett Hardin's last book is titled *The Ostrich Factor: Our Population Myopia*. Harvard Ph.D. Albert Bartlett, in an exhaustive study of the concept of sustainability, asks "Can you think of any problem on any scale, from microscopic to global, whose long-term solution is in any demonstrable way, aided, or assisted, or advanced by having larger populations at the local level, the state level, the national level, or globally?" Current Harvard biology professor E.O. Wilson states that population and population growth with their huge negative impact on life-sustaining environments is "the raging monster upon the Earth." But the political body, except for China where even there population continues to grow, ignores the problem like the plague, which it is. The overpopulation problem and the degradation of the basic resource of fertile soil increasingly now and in the future underlie nearly all other world problems. Haiti is already exhibit A. When will this be recognized?

Populations must be adjusted, at whatever standard of living they are willing to accept, to the regional resources available to them. Neither importing resources from other countries, nor continuing to export excess population are sustainable actions, and the sooner this is recognized the better. Ignoring these realities does not make them go away; it simply allows them to grow increasingly larger and therefore less easily resolved. If not recognized, then Haiti is just a preview of worldwide coming events.

Learn these lessons from Haiti. Population size, and whatever the demands of the standards of living are (different with different cultures), cannot continue to

grow but must fit with the realities of available sustainable resource limits. Several studies including one sponsored by the National Academy of Sciences convincingly show that worldwide population already exceeds the long-term sustainable carrying capacity of the Earth. But this most basic of all facts seems not to have been included yet on political agendas. It is long overdue. The United States is no exception. We have no population policy, and at the highest levels of political leadership there is apparently no concern for how many people we can support on a sustainable renewable resource base, on which we all must ultimately survive, and maintain an acceptable standard of living.

In 1972, the presidentially-appointed Rockefeller Commission was asked to address the question of any benefits of population growth in the U.S. Their conclusion was that there was no advantage to more population. It was ignored and the U.S. population is now 309 million, projected to be 439 million by 2050 (Population Reference Bureau world population data sheet 2009). Even as U.S. population grows, half the topsoil of the nation's breadbasket, Iowa, is in the Mississippi River delta, and more is lost each year with current unsustainable agricultural practices.

The late Gaylord Nelson, who I knew quite well, founder of Earth Day, saw the ominous trends of a declining resource base against a growing population and asked "Where are we headed?" From the dire lessons of Haiti and the foregoing facts, what conclusions do you draw? It is well to recall, as Aldous Huxley stated: **FACTS DO NOT CEASE TO EXIST BECAUSE THEY ARE IGNORED.**

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**About the author:** Walter Youngquist, geologist, is the author of numerous articles and ten books including *GeoDestinies: The inevitable control of Earth resources over nations and individuals*. His observations on the critical relationship between population size and Earth's resources are based on living and working abroad, and travels in more than 70 countries. He now resides in Eugene, Oregon.

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