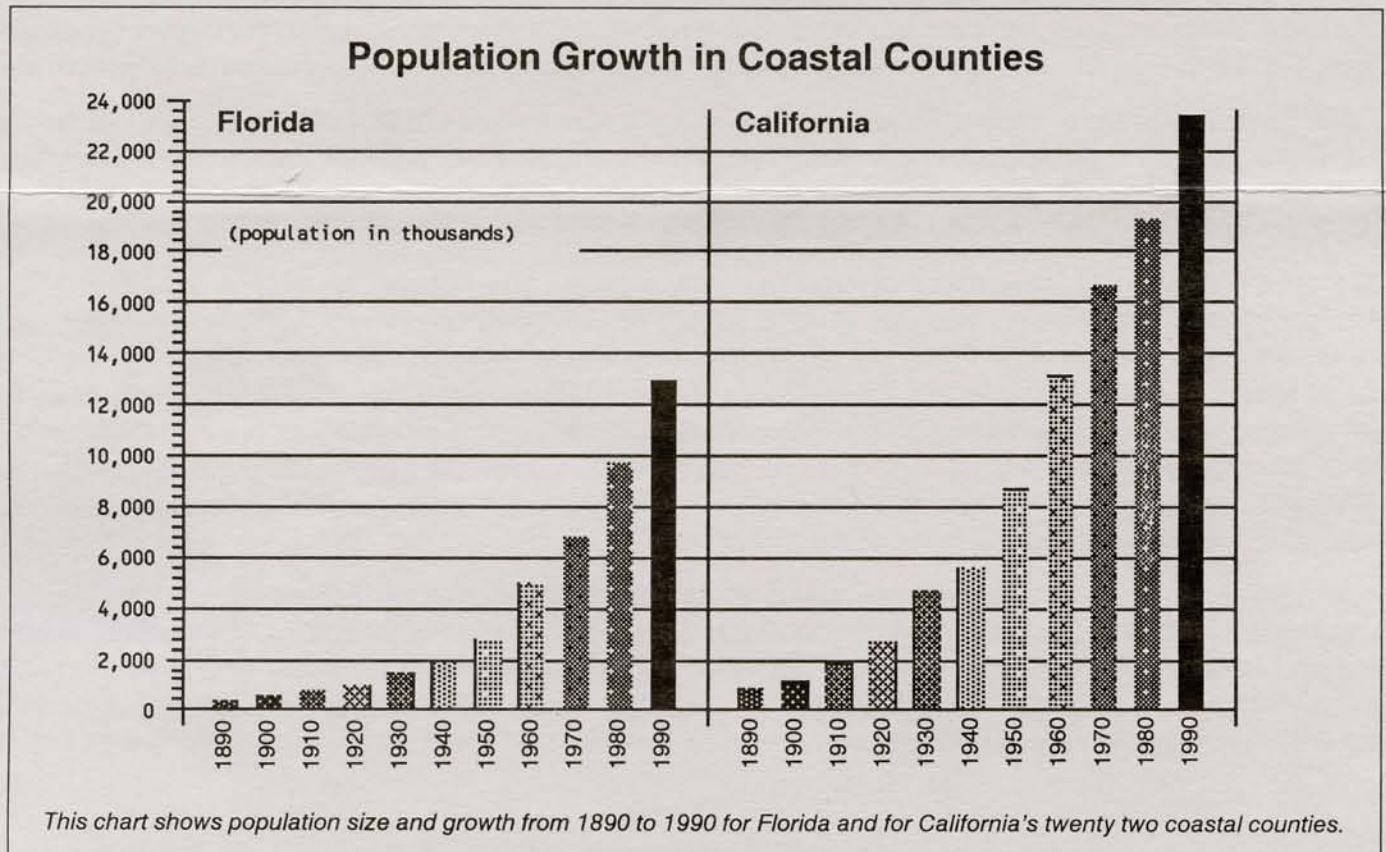




Footnotes

Hurricane Andrew: The Population Factor



The scale of destruction caused by Hurricane Andrew in south Florida is shocking. Numbing pictures appeared on television showing flattened homes and businesses and boats piled on top of one another. A million people lost their electricity. Roughly 250,000 still-dazed people in south Dade county have no place to live and no place to go, little food or water or other basics.

But this is just the latest of the hurricanes that regularly sweep across the peninsula. The entire state is vulnerable, with no portion more than 75 miles from the open sea. All counties in Florida are designated as "coastal counties" by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). A major hurricane has been fully expected and long overdue.

The last big one, also of a near "Category 5" status, to hit this region was in 1947. It was said to have wiped out "hundreds" of buildings—not Andrew's 60,000—and to have damaged the citrus crop, but that damage was not evident in the total U.S. citrus output that year.

Contrast that with Hurricane Andrew and the initial estimate of over \$20 billion in damage to south Florida. That easily makes it the most costly natural disaster in U.S. history. The destruction would be far greater had the center hit just 20 miles to the north in the more densely populated cities of Miami and Coral Gables.

The difference is Florida's population size. There were fewer than 2 million people in the entire state a half-century ago. There are more than 13 million

today. For every 100 people in Florida, there were just 15 a half-century ago and 3 a century ago. In the seven southernmost counties, there were just 9 residents in 1940 for every 100 today and the Everglades, that "river of grass", readily absorbed strong winds and high water. Florida's year round warmth, clear water and beaches continue to attract immigrants, seasonally transplanted northern "snowbirds" and retirees by the thousands. Population grew by three million in the 1980s alone.

Hurricane Andrew dramatically reminds us of what is likely to happen eventually when great numbers settle in environmentally unsound territory.

Florida is one vivid example. California represents a threat of a different sort. Its coast is the contact zone where two great geological plates are moving past each other, and the residents await "the big one"—another earthquake like the major ones that have hit it before. And California is heavily populated and fast growing.

Other coastal zones are vulnerable, and hurricanes have come ashore from Texas to Maine. Yet the U.S. population is flocking to the coasts, and nobody asks whether this is wise. The 426 coastal counties have just 11 percent of the territory in the continental U.S., but hold 110 million people—45 percent of the population. In 1940, the population of these counties was 50 million.

Without a national population policy or even an ongoing debate on what is a desirable U.S. population size and its geographic distribution—and one in balance with the environment—this nation will continue to grow more rapidly than any other industrialized country. If we are to learn from disasters such as Hurricane Andrew, we must look at the size and growth of the U.S. population. That involves a new look at natural increase and at immigration levels, which increasingly are the source of national population growth as our own fertility settles close to replacement levels. We must also ask ourselves whether the recent pattern of growth is healthy, and whether the nation should continue to encourage or support movement of people—Americans and immigrants—into the most vulnerable parts of the country.

Hurricane Andrew is a stunning reminder that nature is still in charge. Other incompatibilities and environmental problems are generated by population growth and changing land use patterns, if not with this speed and ferocity. For example: barrier island beach erosion and loss of wetlands, and overtaxed water supplies. These are all part of the same question. We must ask, what is the appropriate population size suitable to conditions in various regions of the country if we are to respect and live in harmony with nature?

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NPG, Inc., is a nonprofit organization founded in 1972. Annual dues are \$30, and are tax deductible to the extent the law allows. NPG is the only population/environmental organization that calls for a smaller U.S. and world population, and for specific, realistic measures to achieve those goals.