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Journalists fail to link environmental problems with population

By J. Scott Christianson

"A common journalistic mistake is simply to cover events—real or staged—and ignore underlying issues."—R. Griffin in *Interpreting Public Issues*

In 1971, a Gallup poll found that 41 percent of Americans believed population growth was a serious problem for the United States while only 13 percent felt population growth would never be a problem.

Two decades later, the percentage of Americans who view population growth as a problem has surprisingly diminished. A 1992 Gallup survey showed only 29 percent of Americans believe population growth is a serious problem while 24 percent feel it will never be a problem. Ironically, only a year earlier, another poll found 71 percent of Americans support strong environmental protection, even at the expense of economic growth.

Why does interest in the environment grow while concern about one of the main forces causing environmental problems—population growth—waned? In part because the media tend to ignore population pressures in reports about the environment.

"While environmental problems may have achieved more and better coverage in the past five years, the public still has no inkling that population growth causes many of those problems," reports Mike Maher, a graduate student at the University of Texas, who has studied the media's coverage of the relationship between population growth and environmental problems.

In a recent study, Maher randomly selected 150 newspaper articles that focused on three population-driven environmental problems—endangered species, urban sprawl and water shortages—and

analyzed them to see what connection, if any, was made between population growth and the environmental problems the stories report.

"Of the 150-article sample, 16 mention population growth as a cause of the environmental problem described in the story," reported Maher. "Population growth appears in eight urban sprawl stories, seven water storage stories and one story on endangered species. Only one article in 150 mentions that policies to stabilize population might be a possible solution."

"Newspapers, magazines and wire services in cities across the United States and Canada pervasively crop from the story the environmental problem-causing nature of human population growth," reported Maher. "While ignoring that a stable population might be a solution to environmental problems, the media instead direct our attention to palliative solutions: build new dams to supply water, zone to prevent urban sprawl, set aside land for endangered species."

"What confuses people about the nature of their predicament is that these solutions may be effective for a short time. But none will work over the long term. Population growth will eventually necessitate even more dams, more zoning, more endangered species conflicts. Eventually there will be no more runoff to dam, no more untrammelled land to protect. Before the drought broke, California development interests were actually considering towing in polar icebergs, building a pipeline to Alaska's rivers and importing Canadian water in tanker ships to get more fresh water. To such depths have we sunk in order to keep population off the agenda."

Editors and reporters might feel that by linking population growth to environmental problems they cross the line be-

tween objectivity and advocacy. Indeed, many in the media have been accused of skewing facts in order to promote an environmental agenda. In some cases, that has been true. However, that doesn't excuse ignoring, as Maher puts it, the "environmental problem-causing nature of human population growth."

No doubt many reporters and editors don't deliberately ignore the effect of population growth, but rather have a blind spot for such a slow process as population growth. As Molly Ivins, a quick-witted Texas columnist, noted, the media often fail to cover the stories that "seep and creep." No one holds a daily press conference to announce the world population has grown by 250,000 people in the previous 24 hours; it just goes on day after day.

Presenting the fact that population growth exacerbates many environmental problems is not advocacy, but rather sound reporting on the underlying causes of some of our most pressing environmental problems.

If you'd like a copy of Maher's report, *How the News Media Frame the Population-Environment Connection*, write Mike Maher, Assistant Professor of Communications, University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette, LA 70504.

J. Scott Christianson is a free-lance writer in Columbia, Mo. This article ran June 3, 1994, in the *Columbia Daily Tribune*.

On May 1, HQ needs you!

State College headquarters will need three active members to count ballots on Monday, May 1. Lunch is a reward for the usual two-hour session. Call headquarters if you're willing to help.