

The Publication of Paul Ehrlich's  
*The Population Bomb* by the Sierra Club, 1968:  
Wilderness-Thinking, Neo-Malthusianism, and  
Anti-Humanism

by

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## Introduction

In 1968, Stanford University Professor Paul Ehrlich wrote *The Population Bomb*. “The battle to feed all of humanity is over,” the book proclaimed, “In the 1970’s the world will undergo famines—hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now.” World population growth had already outstripped resources on the planet, Ehrlich contended, devastating ecological systems and endangering humanity’s chance of survival. Worse catastrophe could be averted only by “determined and successful efforts at population control.”<sup>1</sup>

Ehrlich advocated the promotion of contraceptive technology, small-family incentives, and international guidance on population planning. He called most dramatically for the cessation of food aid to countries like India, deemed to be beyond the hope of demographic/ecological recovery. Printed for mass consumption, *The Population Bomb* would sell 2 million copies within its first 2 years and go through 12 re-printings, breaking Rachel Carson’s sales record for an ecological book.<sup>2</sup> It was, in short, a sensation. The *New York Times*’ Bayard Webster described *The Population Bomb* “as a concise and most welcome handbook on what is undoubtedly our planet’s most serious problem--too many people.”<sup>3</sup>

With the benefit of hindsight, Ehrlich’s predictions seem alarmist and his remedies extreme. The Neo-Malthusian ideas expressed by *The Population Bomb*

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<sup>1</sup> Paul R. Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1968). Prologue.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement* (Washington DC: Island Press, 1993). 256; Susan Elizabeth Bender, "Immigration and the Environment: The Story of a Sierra Club Policy Initiative" (University of Nevada, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Bayard Webster, "Books of the Times: The Population Bomb, by Paul Ehrlich," *The New York Times* 1969.

ideas had struck accord not just with its Cold War American readership, yet it already resonated strongly with a coterie of devoted wilderness activists in the Sierra Club. A traditional preservationist organization, the Sierra Club had given scant attention to overpopulation or worldwide ecology before 1960. Ideas from American “wilderness thinkers” such as Henry David Thoreau and John Muir had formed the philosophical underpinnings of the Club’s political agenda. From 1952 to 1967, executive director David Brower had overseen the Club’s transition into the most powerful preservation organization in the country, leading a series of successful and highly visible campaigns to save scenic resources from development. American nature and wilderness, and not therefore scarcity and eco-disaster, had constituted the Sierra Club’s traditional framework.

With the emergence of a wider environmental movement in the 1960s, however, Brower and other board members begun to take an interest in population. In 1968, Brower commissioned and published Ehrlich’s text, hoping to communicate the “urgency that will be necessary to fulfillment of the prediction that mankind will survive.” In his Foreword to *The Population Bomb*, Brower wrote that “organizations like the Sierra Club have been much too calm about the ultimate threat to mankind.” Ehrlich gave the keynote address two years later in 1969 at the Sierra Club’s Annual Wilderness Conference.<sup>4</sup>

The Sierra Club’s partnership with Paul Ehrlich tells a larger story about the confluence of wilderness thinking and Neo-Malthusianism during the 1960s, a profound intersection which historiography has not explored. How did a traditional wilderness organization and a pessimistic tract on resource scarcity both become

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<sup>4</sup> David Brower, "Foreword " in *The Population Bomb* (1968). 13

synonymous, in many people's minds, with environmentalism? The purpose of this paper is to study the intellectual overlaps that helped forge this influential pairing. Examining critical interpretations of both wilderness thinking and Neo-Malthusianism, I will argue that a joint understanding of humanity as universally, ontologically destructive played an important role in how the two movements merged.

### Wilderness Thinking and the Sierra Club

*The Population Bomb* and the Sierra Club are both equated with “environmentalism,” a political and social movement maturing in the 1960s that broadly concerned the relationship between humans, the planet, and natural resources.<sup>5</sup> The mid-century Club and Ehrlich's book represented two quite distinct intellectual heritages, however. “Wilderness thinking,” emerged in nineteenth-century America as a reaction, against, and alternative to, industrialization.<sup>6</sup> Initiated by romantics like Henry David Thoreau and John Muir, wilderness writers emphasized the spiritual and transcendent capacity of the natural world. Wilderness and nature, for Muir, “existed for its own sake and its existence must be honored and safeguarded by a human community.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The terms of “environmentalism” and the “environmental movement” are not simple to define, as will be discussed further on in this Introduction. I use them here to describe what is often perceived as a unified, monolithic movement following the 1960s, but that actually encompasses a diverse range of objectives and approaches.

<sup>6</sup> Roderick Nash's seminal work *Wilderness and the American Mind* first explored this subject in 1967. His work set off a surge of interest in the topic of American wilderness thinking that has persisted in environmental historiography. See Roderick Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967).

<sup>7</sup> Philip Shabecoff, *A Fierce Green Fire: The American Environmental Movement* (New York: Hill and Wang 1993). 71

In 1892, Muir founded a society in San Francisco “to lead city people into the mountains” and to initiate collective action for protecting these scenic spaces. Muir’s “Sierra Club” came to represent the country’s first organized, political instrument of wilderness ideology. Its struggle against the construction of a dam in Yosemite’s Hetch Hetchy Valley is celebrated, likewise, as the first major effort to privilege conservation of scenic resources over development. Muir’s famous battle cry demonstrated the Club’s quasi-religious attachment to sublime landscapes: “Dam Hetch Hetchy! As well dam for water-tanks the people's cathedrals and churches, for no holier temple has ever been consecrated by the heart of man.” The campaign failed in 1913, and Muir died shortly after.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the lull in political activity following Muir’s death, however, a new generation of Sierra Club preservationists revived his ideology starting in the late 1940s and early 50s. A heated ongoing debate revolved around Club’s cooperation with industry and resource management bureaucracies like the National Forest Service. Younger Sierra Club leaders such as David Brower, Michael McCloskey, and Edgar Wayburn came to regard the Forest Service, contemptuously, as a “timber service,” and reviled economic exploitation of scenic resources and untouched lands. Increasingly suspicious of “multiple-use” designation for these areas, Brower, McCloskey, Wayburn, and others advocated the creation of a “wilderness” designation for national lands.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Steven Stoll, *U.S. Environmentalism since 1945 : A Brief History with Documents* (New York, N.Y.: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.). 9

<sup>9</sup> Michael P. Cohen, *The History of the Sierra Club, 1892-1970* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988.). 193

Advocacy on behalf of wilderness grew more and more ambitious in the 1950s. A battle over a dam in Dinosaur Park that would rage between 1951 and 1956, pitting the Sierra Club and the Wilderness Society for the first time against the Bureau of Reclamation. The preservationist organizations eventually succeeded in stopping the dam, although at the expense of a dam at less-renowned Glen Canyon. (after visiting this beautiful site for the first time before the construction, Brower would come to regard the disappearance of Glen Canyon under Lake Powell as his greatest lifetime regret.<sup>10</sup>) Brower continued to lead the club in a series of preservationist campaigns into 1960, including the highly publicized fight against two dams on the Grand Canyon. The campaign for federal wilderness designation, meanwhile, finally succeeded in 1964 with the passage of the Wilderness Act by Congress in 1964.<sup>11</sup>

As former club President William Siri would later explain, the mid-century Sierra Club had its “whole attention concentrated on wilderness: wilderness parks; wilderness areas; Wilderness Act; small parcels of primitive areas; roads through wilderness; what the forest service was doing to its forests; areas that we thought ought to be reserved until there was more extensive planning for wilderness.”<sup>12</sup> By the mid-1960s, the Sierra Club was expending most of its energy on the creation of a redwood national park, its highly visible media campaign against the dams in the Grand Canyon, and a debate between conservative and younger board members around the construction of a power plant at Diablo Canyon—all matters of wilderness

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 176

<sup>11</sup> Shabecoff, *Fierce Green Fire*.

<sup>12</sup> William E. Siri, Ann Lage, and Phillip S. Berry, "Reflections on the Sierra Club, the Environment, and Mountaineering, 1950s-1970s: An Interview," (Berkeley: 1979).



protection. Club leaders stood in stoic defense of preservation as an essential environmental priority. Wilderness should act, said executive director Michael McCloskey, as “a reference point,” the ideal to which ecologists and preservationists should strive.<sup>13</sup>

The Club’s publications, leadership, and campaigns of the 1950s and 60s confirm a poignant reinfusion of traditional wilderness ideology. Like their forbearers, most club leaders approached their mission from a primarily romantic, spiritual perspective. In a 1957 essay, Brower defined the Club’s objective as one of “preserving for all our time certain important scenic resources—our resources of wilderness parks, wildlife, and the recreation and inspiration we may always derive from them.” The “conservationists” of the Sierra Club were “people more concerned about what certain natural resources do for their soul than for their bank balance.”<sup>14</sup> Thoreau’s idea of nature as an “antidote” to modern life pervaded Club leaders’ rhetoric, as evinced by Club leader Loren Eisley’s desire for “communion with nature.”<sup>15</sup> Wilderness, others argued, offered a library of experience knowledge that man could not afford to sacrifice. In 1969, board member Daniel Luton told the Club’s annual Wilderness Conference that man needed “explicit terra incognita” to serve as the margin of human understanding, of discovery. He quoted Thoreau: “At the same time that we are earnest to explore and learn all things, we require that all things be mysterious and unexplorable, that land and sea be infinitely wild,

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<sup>13</sup> Michael McCloskey, “Forward,” in *Wilderness: The Edge of Knowledge* ed. Maxine E. McCloskey (San Francisco: Sierra Club, 1969). xi

<sup>14</sup> David Brower, ed., *Wilderness--Conflict and Conscience, For Earth's Sake: The Life and Times of David Brower* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1957; reprint, 1990).261.

<sup>15</sup> Loren Eisley, “Foreword,” in *Not Man Apart: Lines from Robison Jeffers*, ed. David Brower (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1965).

unsurveyed and unfathomed by us because unfathomable. We can never have enough of nature.”<sup>16</sup>

### Neo-Malthusianism in Paul Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb*

Wilderness thinkers’ nostalgia, their appreciation of beauty, and their quasi-religious sentiment strike a discernible contrast with the pragmatic alarmism of Paul Ehrlich’s “Neo-Malthusianism.” Ehrlich and his colleagues’ theories represented the 20<sup>th</sup>-century incarnation of the English economist Sir Thomas Malthus’s seminal hypothesis on population and scarcity. In 1798, Malthus contended that “the power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man,” such that a growing number of people would inevitably cause food shortage, famine, and conflict.<sup>17</sup>

Malthus’ abstraction, while influential in Europe, did not take hold of the American imagination for more than a century. Yet Americans’ conventional faith in abundance began to fade after the Great Depression and World War II, with the increasing awareness of deprivation at home and abroad.<sup>18</sup> In the 1940s, William Vogt’s *The Road to Survival* and Fairfield Osborn’s *Our Plundered Planet* articulated growing anxieties about overpopulation and scarcity.<sup>19</sup> Both of these works had reasonably popular receptions, but little political influence. In the 1950s, the population-control movement received a financial boost from the Rockefeller

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<sup>16</sup> *Wilderness: The Edge of Knowledge*, ed. Maxine E. McCloskey (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1970). 2

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Robert Malthus, "The Principle of Population," in *Green History*, ed. Derek Wall (Routledge: New York, 1798).

<sup>18</sup> Thomas B. Robertson, "The Population Bomb: Population Growth, Globalization, and American Environmentalism, 1945-1980" (University of Wisconsin, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*. 36

Foundation, whose funds backed the Population Council, Planned Parenthood, and the Population Reference Bureau in the United States.<sup>20</sup>

*The Population Bomb*, in contrast, caused a stir about world population and demographic collapse that none of these efforts had approached. According to *Choice Magazine*'s 1969 review, Ehrlich's book was "a useful compilation of facts, issues, and concerns about overpopulation for the layman who has little knowledge of the magnitude and immediacy of world population problems." Certainly, its author and publisher hoped *The Population Bomb* would appeal to a mass audience. It was intended, as *Choice* pointed out, "as a stimulus for discussion and social and political action."<sup>21</sup>

Ehrlich introduced his topic with the scene of his family's recent visit to India. "I have understood the population explosion intellectually for a long time," he wrote, elaborating, "I came to understand it emotionally one stinking hot night in Delhi a couple of years ago." From the car from which Ehrlich, his wife, and his daughter peered out into the city, Ehrlich's family was "frankly, frightened" by the number of "people....People eating, people washing, people sleeping. People visiting, arguing, and screaming."<sup>22</sup> For Ehrlich, this scene epitomized the world population crisis. He regretted that, "in all the mess of expanding populations, faltering food production, and environmental deterioration are enmeshed miserable, hungry, desperate human beings."<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> James Ridgeway, *The Politics of Ecology* (New York: E.P. Dutton and Co. Inc., 1970). 183

<sup>21</sup> Michael E. Endres, *On Defusing the Population Bomb* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Company, Inc., 1975). 31.

<sup>22</sup> Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*. 15

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* 42

In his first chapter, Ehrlich defined population growth in a simple mathematical equation. The rate of growth, he argued, was equal to the birth rate minus the death rate. “The world’s population will continue to grow as long as the birth rate exceeds the death rate,” he explained. Because not enough people were dying to keep up with the number of people being born, Ehrlich warned, resource depletion would lead to “a death rate solution” to the overpopulation problem. In this scenario, “ways to raise the death rate--war, famine, pestilence--find us.”<sup>24</sup>

Overpopulation was already creating worldwide food scarcity and ecological decline, Ehrlich argued. After 1958, food production had no longer kept up with population growth, forcing developed countries to export crops to their “underdeveloped” counterparts. Population growth had nevertheless remained significantly higher in the underdeveloped world, Ehrlich noted.<sup>25</sup> Outbreaks of epidemics, moreover, would likely increase with the number of people.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, agricultural technology would lead to only greater famine and devastation in the long-run, due to pollution and crop species simplification. Resulting food crises would accelerate further, Ehrlich predicted, as increased pressure on land led to soil degradation. The 1965 Indian famine had confirmed for Ehrlich that “too many people,” “too little food”, and “a dying planet” were creating to catastrophe, if governments did not take immediate action to reduce population growth.<sup>27</sup>

Thus far, the text continued, meek efforts to stem population growth had failed miserably. “Family planning,” because of its voluntary nature, had done

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<sup>24</sup> Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*. 34

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 37

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 70.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

nothing to slow reproduction in countries like India—where “people *want* larger families.”<sup>28</sup> Progress on the population problem, moreover, suffered from America’s “preoccupation with death control,” as evinced by the predominance of disease research over population control research.<sup>29</sup>

Ehrlich’s subsequent chapter imagined three “scenarios” to “describe the kinds of disasters that will occur as mankind slips into the famine decades.”<sup>30</sup> In these hypotheticals, Ehrlich explored the possibility of food riots, uprisings, civil wars, and world nuclear. His first scenario begins with a war in Thailand in 1972, food riots in China, India, and Brazil, and ends in a nuclear showdown with China that kills 100 million Americans. Even more terrifying, the second scenario concludes with nuclear fallout in 1980 between China, Russia, and the U.S. Only cockroaches, postulated Ehrlich, would survive such a scene<sup>31</sup>

The chapter posed a final “cheerful” proposition:

In 1974, the United States government finally realizes that the food-population balance in most areas cannot attain self-sufficiency. American expeditionary forces are withdrawn from Vietnam and Thailand, and the United States announces it will no longer send food to India, Egypt, and some other countries which it considers beyond hope....Several cheap, long-term anticonception drugs are developed and made available for wide distribution. Famine and food riots sweep Asia....Japan and Australia become the dominant Asian powers, forming a tight, pro-American alliance.”<sup>32</sup>

This sequence outlined Ehrlich’s proscriptions for salvaging the world from demographic collapse. He noted that this scenario offered “considerably more appeal

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 83

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 91

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 72

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 78

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 80

than the other [scenarios], even though it presumes the death by starvation of perhaps as many as half a billion people, one-fifth of the world population.”<sup>33</sup>

Ehrlich assured his readers that “a general answer to the question, ‘What needs to be done?’ is simple. We must rapidly bring the world population under control, reducing the growth rate to zero or making it go negative.”<sup>34</sup> The means for reaching this objective would require a great deal more work, he argued however. In the United States, the government would need to define an optimum population size, create a federal agency on population, enhance sexual education in schools, and redesign its tax system to reward smaller families and penalize large ones. Ehrlich dismissed the possibility of sterilization through the water supply, due to contemporary technological constraints. Yet he nevertheless discussed the technique hypothetically, recommending that governments would be able to issue antidotes to selected couples.<sup>35</sup>

With regard to the international community, Ehrlich advocated for “realism in international aid.” The U.S. and other developed countries should, he urged, identify countries that “are so far behind in the population-food game that there is no hope that our food aid will see them through to self-sufficiency.”<sup>36</sup> In this category, Ehrlich included India and East Pakistan. The problem of overpopulation had progressed far beyond conventional methods of coping; only through such “radical surgery,” he contended, “does the patient have a chance of survival.”<sup>37</sup> Those countries still considered potentially viable, such as West Pakistan, would receive aid

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 80

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 131

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 137

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 160

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 149

from industrialized countries based on the adoption of population control programs and agricultural improvements. U.S. officials could distribute televisions to air population control information, Ehrlich recommended. In some places, teams would travel to communities to demonstrate proper agricultural techniques.<sup>38</sup> Through these alterations and many others yet unnamed, wrote Ehrlich, the world could hope to stave off more serious, population-induced disaster.

### Neo-Malthusianism, Wilderness-Thinking, and the Roots of Modern Environmentalism in Historiography

By 1975, Ehrlich had become “the best known advocate of a zero level of population growth.”<sup>39</sup> He is, moreover, credited with helping to bring the population-control movement into league with “conservationists” such as Brower.<sup>40</sup>

Superficially, the overlap between Neo-Malthusianism and wilderness protection is obscured by their differing end goals; preservationists were traditionally preoccupied with protecting pristine nature, while Ehrlich focused on famine, war, and the extinction of mankind.

However, several members of the club had gradually begun to take a keen interest in world population growth since the beginning of the decade. William Siri recalled that David Brower had first raised population as a concern in the 50s or early 60s, at a board caucus.<sup>41</sup> Though most initially rejected Brower’s call to action, the board began to seriously discuss it by 1964 and would espouse several policy

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 162

<sup>39</sup> Endres, *On Defusing the Population Bomb*. 31

<sup>40</sup> Ridgeway, *The Politics of Ecology*. 186

<sup>41</sup> Siri, "Reflections on the Sierra Club, the Environment, and Mountaineering, 1950s-1970s: An Interview." 38

positions advocating population control. For many club members, population issues appealed directly to wilderness preservation concerns. Its first official resolution on population, adopted on March 13, 1965, stated that “the ‘population explosion’ ...has caused an increasing scarcity of wilderness and wildlife and has impaired the beauty of whole regions, as well as reducing the standards and the quality of life.” This early policy called simply for increased educational efforts on population control. By 1966, however, the board had adopted a new position urging U.S. legislation to limit population growth.<sup>42</sup> This came shortly before Brower’s commissioning of Ehrlich’s text, which Siri reflected, was “the most effective thing the club could have done” to address the population problem.<sup>43</sup>

It is worth recognizing the reluctance of many members of the broader environmental movement to identify with Ehrlich’s Neo-Malthusianism—and the Sierra Club’s reluctance to identify with them. In 1962, Rachel Carson’s best-selling book *Silent Spring* exposed the detrimental impact of pesticides on the natural world and on human health. Her work set off a maelstrom of environmental thought and activism concerning chemical pollution. The same year, Murray Bookchin published *Our Synthetic Environment*, describing ecological and health risks associated with industrial pollutants, and advocating for cleaner technology and energy production, as well as the reordering of economic society into small, more self-sufficient regions. Ecologist Barry Commoner, throughout the decade, identified technological excess as the greatest challenge to human survival.<sup>44</sup> These authors, highly influential in the 1960s tide of environmental activism, did not align themselves with *The Population*

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<sup>42</sup> Bender, "Immigration and the Environment: The Story of a Sierra Club Policy Initiative". 20.

<sup>43</sup> Siri interview, 32

<sup>44</sup> Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*. 87, 170



*Bomb*. In fact, Commoner and Bookchin each “rejected the notion of overpopulation and resource depletion as the sole or even chief cause of our environmental ills.”<sup>45</sup>

Moreover, despite the national spotlight on environmental issues, many of the board’s conservative members felt hostile to the adoption of *any* policies outside of the traditional outdoors and wilderness framework. The shift toward broader environmental policies regarding pesticides, pollution, land-use planning, energy, and urban environments occurred slowly, therefore.<sup>46</sup> In 1963 and 1964, Club members debated creating a policy on pesticides, but the discussion was limited to the use of the chemicals in national parks, with the policy-writer explicitly rejecting addressing “the larger environmental issue.” The board did not adopt a general policy on pesticides until during the spring of 1965, three years after Carson’s call to action in *Silent Spring*.<sup>47</sup> By 1969, only one out of the Club’s eight legislative program priorities discussed pollution.<sup>48</sup> The Sierra Club would not, moreover, engage actively in Earth Day 1970.<sup>49</sup> Then-executive director Michael McCloskey made clear his sense of cooption by naïve, rowdy force on the world’s first Earth Day: “We did not particularly identify with the counterculture that was heavily involved in Earth day organizing. We believed more in mastering the arts of political persuasion than in demonstrating to show our discontent.”<sup>50</sup> The Sierra Club kept itself at a safe distance from other elements of the environmental movement.

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<sup>45</sup> Shabecoff, *Fierce Green Fire*. 97

<sup>46</sup> Cohen, *The History of the Sierra Club, 1892-1970*. 334

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.* 337-8

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.* 391

<sup>49</sup> Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*. 107

<sup>50</sup> Michael McCloskey, *In the Thick of It: My Life in the Sierra Club* (Washington, D.C: Island Press, 2005). 105

The Club's close identification with Neo-Malthusianism thus becomes even more striking, in contrast. What attracted Sierra Club leaders to Ehrlich's theory of overpopulation and ecological collapse? Historiography has not answered this question directly. Rather, the Sierra Club and *The Population Bomb* are subsumed as characters in a debated narrative about the origins of the broadly-defined "environment movement." Nearly all historians of environmentalism view the mid-twentieth century, and especially the 1960s, as a moment of significant breakthrough for this cause. They differ, however, on the movement's roots and defining characteristics.

More traditional historiography has characterized pre-1960s environmentalism as the coexistence of two distinct philosophies: conservation and preservation.<sup>51</sup> Personified by Gifford Pinchot and John Muir respectively, these paradigms are described as a romantic, spiritual attachment to nature, versus a pragmatic approach to natural resources usage.<sup>52</sup> Conservationism and preservation, in these histories, matured into the modern, ecological environmentalism of the 1960s.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> See Rickey L. Hendricks, "The Conservation Movement: A Critique of Historical Sources," *The History Teacher* 16, no. 1 (1982), and Phillip Shabecoff, *Fierce Green Fire*. The conservation/preservation division has also been called the difference between "conservation and conservationist" by the Sierra Club's David Brower, "environmentalism and conservation" by Steven Stoll, and with a recent political twist, "progressivism and pastoralism" by Bob Pepperman Taylor. The haphazardness of terminology demonstrates the historiography's convoluted state, more generally. See Brower, ed., *Wilderness--Conflict and Conscience*, Bob Pepperman Taylor, *Our Limits Transgressed: Environmental Political Thought in America* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1992). And Stoll, *U.S. Environmentalism since 1945: A Brief History with Documents*. 9

<sup>52</sup> First Chief of the U.S. Forest Service Gifford Pinchot initiated a scientific forest management program in 1905. His efforts are widely identified with conservationism, a movement that resembles Malthusianism in that both place stress on human usage of natural resources. Yet where Pinchot emphasized the possibility of abundance through careful management, Malthus had seen the unavoidability of eventually depleting these resources. Bob Pepperman Taylor discusses the similarities and distinctions in Taylor, *Our Limits Transgressed*. 50

<sup>53</sup> Rickey Hendrix, for instance, categorizes Rachel Carson, Barry Commoner, David Brower, and Paul Ehrlich all under the same heading in 1960s environmentalism. See Hendricks, "The Conservation Movement: A Critique of Historical Sources." 79

Historian Robert Gottlieb, among others, has challenged this dualistic narrative of environmentalism in favor of a more diverse one. Gottlieb claims that a large *mélange* of humanist and progressive movements in early 1900s contributed as much to 1960s environmentalism as did preservation or conservation.<sup>54</sup> These influences included public and occupational health advocates, he argues. In the 70s, likeminded voices such as Ralph Nader and Barry Commoner did not identify with “mainstream” environmental organizations such as the Sierra Club, but continued to focus on grassroots “empowerment, environmental justice, equity, and urban and industrial restructuring.”<sup>55</sup> In a similar vein, historian Martin Melosi locates the origins of the 1980s environmental justice movement in the Civil Rights Movement.<sup>56</sup> These works of history underscore that the environmental movement was not and is not a monolithic unit, but rather a varied set of political ideologies, priorities, and practices (Gottlieb demonstrates this most thoroughly). They focus more, however, on the differences between various environmental ideologies than on the philosophical underpinnings they shared.

Historians Samuel Hays and Adam Rome, in contrast, have examined the reasons that environmentalism-*at-large* emerged so powerfully in mid-century America. In a number of influential works, Hays identifies a distinction between the conservation movement of the pre-WWII era and the environmentalism of the post-war period. The former represented a “producer mentality,” concerned with efficiency for production’s sake, he argued. Along with rising expectations after

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<sup>54</sup> Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*. 86

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 170

<sup>56</sup> Martin V. Melosi, “Equity, Eco-Racism and Environmental History,” *Environmental History Review* 19, no. 3 (1995).

1945, however, came a consumer drive for environmental quality that turned to the public sector for regulation. 1960s environmentalism thus has its roots in *consumerism*, in a demand for more and better.<sup>57</sup> Rome built on this conception, arguing that that the 1960s owed its environmentalist boom to “unprecedented affluence” and awareness of environmental hazards, and the science of ecology. Post-war prosperity induced a public clamor for a higher quality of life, for scenic resources, and for clean air and clean water.<sup>58</sup>

Most recently, a dissertation by Thomas B. Robertson challenged this prevailing paradigm in which quality-of-life issues alone gave rise to mid-century environmentalism. Robertson’s work is the only in-depth analysis of *The Population Bomb*, the book’s historical context, and its impacts on American policy and environmental thought. The blossoming of the environmental movement during this period had as much to do with fears about a *diminished quality of life* as they did with rising expectations, Robertson contends. He points particularly to Neo-Malthusianism, as exemplified by *The Population Bomb*, explaining:

While no doubt these were crucial to the development of environmentalism, they went hand in hand with other concerns--about poverty, national security, race, and gender, both at home and abroad--that the history of postwar Malthusianism allows us to see more clearly. In particular, reintegrating Malthusianism into the history of environmentalism allows us to see that the environmental movement was as much a story about poverty--a low ‘quality of life’--as about the high quality of life associated with prosperity.<sup>59</sup>

This essay embraces Robertson’s contention that Neo-Malthusianism, and particularly *The Population Bomb*, contributed much more to emerging

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<sup>57</sup> Samuel P. Hays, *Beauty, Health, and Permanence: Environmental Politics in the United States, 1955-1985* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

<sup>58</sup> Adam Rome, "'Give Earth a Chance': The Environmental Movement and the Sixties," *Journal of American History* 90, no. 2 (September 2003).

<sup>59</sup> Robertson, "The Population Bomb".

environmental thought than is often acknowledged. I adopt much of his critique, as Chapter 2 will attest. My study differs from Robertson in that where he examines the relationship between Neo-Malthusianism, the American public and government, and “environmentalism” at large, I focused specifically on the relationship between two specific strands of a complex web: wilderness thinking and Neo-Malthusianism. My objective, therefore, is to understand the intellectual commonalities between wilderness thinking and Neo-Malthusianism, a powerful partnership of two environmental traditions (among others) that together created a unique—and often noxious—environmental rhetoric. I will draw my conclusions by examining mid-century wilderness-thinking and Neo-Malthusianism, as embodied by the Sierra Club and *The Population Bomb* respectively.

I will approach this question through critical assessments of both movements. Chapter 1 will outline several recent criticisms of wilderness thinking and preservation, arguing that wilderness thinking has separated and excluded humanity from its ideal of nature. I will analyze the Sierra Club’s understanding of nature and humanity through two of its 1960s publications published prior to *The Population Bomb*, entitled *This Is the American Earth* (1960) and *Not Man Apart* (1965). Using these lenses into the Club’s philosophy, we can observe the anti-humanist tendencies that governed its wilderness oriented ideology.

Chapter 2 will begin by discussing the historical context for *The Population Bomb*’s popular success. Just as Chapter 1 lays out critiques of wilderness thinking, Chapter 2 will present a chronology of resistance to *The Population Bomb* following

its publication in 1968.<sup>60</sup> This sequence demonstrates an evolving disaffection with Neo-Malthusianism in the 1970s and into the 1990s, particularly within the political left. I argue that with the benefit of hindsight, furthermore, these commentaries illuminate commonalities between wilderness thinking and Neo-Malthusianism. The chapter will conclude with my own description of how *The Population Bomb* universalized humans as biological beings, while simultaneously devaluing lives of those deemed different, hopeless, and dangerous.

Finally, Chapter 3 will explore the Sierra Club/*Population Bomb* intersection, returning to *This Is the American Earth* and *Not Man Apart*, and ending with the Sierra Club's 1969 Wilderness Conference. The fusion created a distinct blend of alarmism and romanticism in Club literature, I show, that is frequently attributed to environmentalism as an entire movement. I explore the myriad levels of identification between these two environmental philosophies. By reexamining Club literature through the lens of Ehrlich's critics, I demonstrate that many of the problems with Neo-Malthusianism also pervaded the mid-century Sierra Club. Most important was their joint understanding of humans as universally destructive, this paper will contend. The union of Neo-Malthusian and wilderness thinking during the 1960s thus combined not only the "best" of alarmism and romanticism, but also the noxious, anti-humanist elements identified by their critics.

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<sup>60</sup> Most of these analyses span several decades after the Sierra Club's publication and Paul Ehrlich's appearance at the Club's Wilderness Conference in 1969. I do not mean to suggest that they themselves influenced the Sierra Club's identification with Neo-Malthusianism, but rather that their observations shed light on intellectual overlaps.

## Chapter 1

### Wilderness Critics, and Mid-Century Sierra Club Ideology

David Brower introduced the Sierra Club's annual Wilderness Conference in 1969 by sharing passages from well-loved wilderness writing, both contemporary and classic. These familiar words, he offered, could provide "some background music for what the people here concerned with wilderness have to say and indeed what wilderness itself has to say." Henry David Thoreau had mused, "I should not like to think that some demigod had come before me and picked out some of the best of the stars. I wish to know an entire heaven and an entire earth." Loren Eiseley described, "I dropped my fistful of earth. I hear it roll inanimate back into the fully at the base of the hill: iron, carbon, the chemicals of life. Like men from those wild tribes who had haunted these hills before me seeking visions, I made my sign to the great darkness." And Aldo Leopold had once asked, "And when the dawnwind stirs through the ancient cottonwoods, and the gray light steals down from the hills over the old river sliding softly past its wide sandbars--what if there be no more goose music?" The Sierra Club's affinity for this romantic, exulting yet mournful wilderness thought manifests itself in Brower's invocation of these stunning and iconic passages.<sup>1</sup>

During the mid-twentieth century, the spiritual, aesthetic, scientific, and innate merits of "wilderness" were not to be questioned by any of these leaders, or rarely by anyone who did not have economic interests in its exploitation. Wilderness' status among environmentalists and progressives would not remain inviolate forever, however. In later decades, the construct of wilderness would be scrutinized as being

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<sup>1</sup> David Brower, "Introduction," in *Wilderness: The Edge of Knowledge*, ed. Maxine E. McCloskey (San Francisco Sierra Club Books, 1969). 13-15

essentializing, elitist, and at odds with more comprehensive environmental and humanist ideals. Critics argued that by sanctifying “nature” as being separate from, and superior to, humanity, wilderness thinkers had drawn a dangerous dichotomy between the two. In this chapter, I will outline several of these critiques. I posit that a mistrust of humankind as “unnatural” or “naturally” destructive did exist as an underlying theme in the rhetoric and publications of the mid-century Sierra Club, even before it joined forces with Paul Ehrlich in 1967. This ideology will be explored in two of the Club’s major publications, *This Is the American Earth* in 1960 and *Not Man Apart* in 1965. Finally, the literary emphasis in these works on “returning to nature,” gave wilderness thinkers only a vague, metaphorical conception of how restore environmental balance, leaving open a significant political gap to be filled by Neo-Malthusian.

### The Critique of Wilderness

Critical perspectives on wilderness thinking surfaced only rarely among mid-century environmentalists, especially among Sierra Club ranks. One unusual exception in the 1960s was ecologist Stephan Spurr’s address to the Club’s Wilderness Conference of 1963, which elaborated on wilderness as a sociological construct rather than an ecological one.<sup>2</sup> The 1970s and 80s saw the flowering of the Environmental Justice movement, in contrast, gathering activists concerned about the neglect of urban environments by mainstream environmentalism. Environmental historian Martin Melosi describes that “leaders in the Environmental Justice

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<sup>2</sup> R. Edward Grumbine, "Using Biodiversity as a Justification for Nature Protection in the Us," in *The Great New Wilderness Debates*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press 1996). 605



Movement are prone to characterize mainstream environmentalism...as white, often male, middle- and upper-class, primarily concerned with wilderness preservation and conservation, and insensitive to--or at least ill-equipped to deal with--the interests of minorities.”<sup>3</sup> Poor communities, and particularly communities of color, were disproportionately harnessed with America’s environmental burdens, like landfills, toxic waste sites, and traffic pollution, as well as with ensuing health problems. At the 1991, public health and social justice activist Dana Alston described EJ’s definition of environmentalism--that the “environment” constituted not pristine nature, but rather the places “where we live, where we work, and where we play.” The mainstream environmental movement, these critics suggested, had prioritized wilderness at the expense of human communities.<sup>4</sup>

Along similar lines in 1989, Indian sociologist and historian Ramachandra Guha published an article in journal *Environmental Ethics* entitled “Radical American Environmentalism and Wilderness Preservation: A Third World Critique.” Guha’s essay examined the negative social impact abroad that, he argued, American wilderness thinking had inflicted on Third World communities, in the form of “international conservation.” He observed that American-based conservation organizations such as World Wildlife Fund and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources sought to “transplant the American system of natural parks” into India and Africa. Whereas these efforts often corresponded to the protection of specific endangered mammals, such as the tiger, rhinoceros, and elephant, they frequently displaced existing indigenous communities

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<sup>3</sup> Melosi, "Equity, Eco-Racism and Environmental History." 5

<sup>4</sup> Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*. 5

and villages. The practice of “wilderness conservation” thus entailed the removal of *human* communities who had, like the tiger and elephant, traditionally inhabited the area.<sup>5</sup> Guha noted that the setting-aside of wilderness areas had further impoverished historically marginalized groups, while adding to the status of traditional elites. Moreover, because “wildlands preservation has been identified with environmentalism,” governments tended to neglect public health needs such as clean air and water.<sup>6</sup> The international conservation movement dramatized a uniquely American discourse on wilderness that, Guha argued, required the exclusion of human communities, even when those humans had resided sustainably within it for centuries.<sup>7</sup>

Guha’s claims would be echoed and expanded several years later in 1995, when American environmental historian William Cronon published “The Trouble with Wilderness” as the opening piece in the collection *Uncommon Ground: Toward Reinventing Nature*. Selections from his essay appeared later that year in the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*. Decisive, far-reaching, and provocative, Cronon’s argument ignited for a larger audience a debate about the meaning of wilderness that had existed quietly among academics for several years.<sup>8</sup> In essence, “The Trouble with Wilderness” advocated a reconsideration of the “wilderness idea” to better encompass the needs of humankind.

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<sup>5</sup> Ramachandra Guha, "American Environmentalism and Radical Preservation: A Third World Critique," in *The New Great Wilderness Debate*, ed. J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1989). 235

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. 235

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 241

<sup>8</sup> J. Baird Callicott and Michael P. Nelson, *The Great New Wilderness Debate* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1998). 12

Cronon's essay provides several useful analytical tools for understanding the dominant themes in the Sierra Club's philosophy of preservation and environmentalism. Americans had not always viewed "wilderness" in such a positive light, argued Cronon. Judeo-Christian traditions and biblical stories depicted wilderness as a place of "moral confusion and despair," the chaos on the margins of civilization, and the setting of Adam and Eve's exile.<sup>9</sup> Before the mid-eighteenth century, Cronon continued, American writers had almost always associated wilderness with a frightening breach from the safety and morality of the town. Individuals who ventured into the wilderness, usually by coercion or against their better judgments, went "always in fear and trembling."<sup>10</sup>

The romantic movement of the mid-eighteenth century would invert this perception, without challenging the man-nature dualism and religious undertones on which it depended. Cronon explained that within the period of several decades, the concept of a dangerous no-man's-land had been replaced by attachment to what seemed a fast disappearing commodity in America. Writers such as Thoreau and later, the Sierra Club's founder John Muir would admire rather than fear these places, looking to sublime landscapes for inspiration and escape.<sup>11</sup> As these thinkers helped invert wilderness into a positive symbol, Adam and Eve would be re-identified as the destroyers of precious wilderness, of the Eden that was all around them. This religious, Garden-of-Eden narrative surfaced prominently in Sierra Club publications, as I will demonstrate later.

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<sup>9</sup> William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness, or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in *The Great New Wilderness Debate*, ed. J. Baird Callicot and Michael P. Nelson (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1995). 473.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.473

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 476-8

Also central to Sierra Club literature was a uniquely American frontier discourse, which Cronon located in Frederick Jackson Turner's "Frontier Thesis" of 1893.<sup>12</sup> A historian, Turner had submitted that the challenges of an ever-expanding Western Frontier and the unceasing contact between pioneers and wilderness had imbued in Americans their "exceptional," pioneering character. With the closing of the frontier at the end of the century, therefore, came the close of a special era. Wilderness protection offered the possibility of preserving the extraordinary attributes of frontierism. Cronon contended that frontier mythology planted the "seeds of wilderness preservation in the United States, for if wild land had been so crucial in the making of the nation, then surely one must save its last remnants as monuments to the American past—and as an insurance policy to protect its future."<sup>13</sup> Proponents of American masculinity and rugged individuality like Theodore Roosevelt would latch onto the wilderness ideal as the arbiter of the manliness that over-civilization threatened to wipe out. For these racial and economic elites, "frontier nostalgia became an important vehicle for expressing a peculiarly bourgeois form of antimodernism."<sup>14</sup>

Wilderness had thus come to symbolize "the one place we can turn for escape from our own too-muchness," wrote Cronon. It had, moreover, taken on the qualities of beauty, simplicity, and honor that urban, industrial societies so sorely lacked.<sup>15</sup> Wilderness ideology's enduring impact on environmentalism (for Cronon, the movement of the 1990s) manifested itself in the modern movement's emphasis on

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<sup>12</sup> Cronon refers to Turner's seminal essay, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*.

<sup>13</sup> Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness." 479

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 480-1

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 471

preservation. The tropical rainforest, in particular had “become the most powerful modern icon of unfallen, sacred land—a veritable Garden of Eden—for many Americans and Europeans.” Repeating Guha, Cronon notes that protecting the rainforest “all too often means protecting it from the people who live there.” In this way, thinkers had turned on its head the biblical association of wilderness with evil; nature, now, had much more to fear from mankind than mankind from it. The new merit placed on wilderness during the nineteenth century, in this way, had only fortified the classic duality of man v. nature.<sup>16</sup>

Cronon’s “trouble” with wilderness lies in this strict dichotomy that wilderness thinking had affirmed between wilderness and humanity, between what was natural and “good,” and what was unnatural and corrupting. “Wilderness embodies a dualistic vision in which the human is entirely outside the natural,” Cronon asserts. “If we allow ourselves to believe that nature, to be true, must also be wild, then our very presence in nature represents it fall.” This “set of bipolar moral scales,” had bound humanity to failure; if humans could not be part of wilderness, Cronon observes, they could nourish it only by removing themselves from it. By forging these boundaries, therefore, wilderness ideology left “little hope of discovering what an ethical, sustainable, honorable human place in nature might actually like.”<sup>17</sup>

Most importantly, the inordinate value placed on wilderness discouraged environmentalists from attending to places that did not meet the wilderness ideal. Environmentalism based on the preservation of wilderness had in this manner come

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. 486

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. 484

to prioritize the protection of sublime landscapes over the protection of human spaces, particularly urban ones. Thus, he continued, wilderness environmentalists ideal often neglected “environmental problems whose victims are mainly people, for such problems usually surface in landscapes that have already ‘fallen’ and are no longer wild.” His criticism here alluded to EJ’s observations, arguing that wilderness ideology tends to exclude

...problems of occupational health and safety in industrial settings, problems of toxic waste exposure on ‘unnatural’ urban and agricultural sites, problems of poor children poisoned by lead exposure in the inner city, problems of famine and poverty and human suffering in the ‘overpopulated’ places of the earth—problems, in short, of environmental justice. If we set too high a stock on wilderness, too many other corners of the earth become less than natural and too many other people become less than human, thereby giving us permission not to care much about their suffering or fate.”<sup>18</sup>

In short, by being inferior and injurious to nature, humans did not merit the kind of attention that wilderness demanded. Taking Cronon’s analysis of the Garden-of-Eden metaphor one step farther, one sees that this narrative in fact attributes to humans a *new* original sin, a selfishness that would cause them to destroy paradise. I will refer to this concept as the *wilderness* doctrine of original sin, and will argue that it plays a central role in Sierra Club literature of the 1960s.

#### The Sierra Club’s *This Is the American Earth*, 1960

Cronon and Guha each reserved their most piercing criticisms for proponents of “Deep Ecology,” which was, they argued, the most extreme incarnation of the wilderness problem. Deep Ecology emerged as radical wing of the environmental movement in the 1980s, advocating for a “biocentric” reconfiguration of a

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. 489

traditionally “anthropocentric” world view.<sup>19</sup> This philosophy, Guha and Cronon contended, embodied the worst in wilderness thinking, and carried with it dangerous implications for how environmentalism would care for human populations.

EJ, Guha, and Cronon’s commentaries, however, resonate also with deep ecology’s more mainstream precursors in the mid-century Sierra Club. For Club leaders of this era, “wilderness” signified a place that was “unspoilt,” “untouched,” or “pristine” because of man’s absence from it.<sup>20</sup> At the North American Wildlife Conference in 1959, Brower defined wilderness through language of the federal Wilderness Bill, for which he was busily campaigning at the time: “A wilderness, in contrast with those areas where man and his own works dominate the landscape, is hereby recognized as an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.”<sup>21</sup> The absence of human influence, for Brower and other members, constituted the defining and most valuable characteristic of wilderness, yet it also represented the key to what made wilderness so vulnerable.

In 1960, the Club formed its first Publication Committee, chaired by Brower, whose first project would be the publication of *This Is the American Earth*.<sup>22</sup> Marking the beginning of the Sierra Club Club’s Exhibit Format Books, Brower envisioned a series of prose and images that would evoke appreciation and awe, while simultaneously highlighting the vulnerability of America’s sacred landscapes. *This Is*

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<sup>19</sup> For more on Deep Ecology, see Phillip F. Cramer, *Deep Environmental Politics* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1998).

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Brower’s introduction to “De Facto Wilderness: What Is Its Place?” in David Brower, *For Earth’s Sake : The Life and Times of David Brower* (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1990). 288

<sup>21</sup> David Brower, “Address at North American Wildlife Conference,” in *The Life and Times of David Brower*, ed. David Brower (Salt Lake City: Peregrine Smith Books, 1959). 292.

<sup>22</sup> Cohen, *The History of the Sierra Club, 1892-1970*.

*the American Earth* gracefully accomplished these objectives through the juxtaposition of Nancy Newhall's verse narration with Ansel Adams' stunning black and white photography.

The collection reads like an environmental history picture book, summarizing the relationship between man and earth since humans first appeared on the planet. Text and photograph recount a brilliant national legacy of American freedom, bounty, and magnificent beauty, while warning of the looming threat to these cherished gifts, and deriding humanity for its insidious encroachment. Religion allusions to Eden and Apocalypse are quite heavy-handed. These themes, along with use of frontier ideology and the wilderness doctrine of original sin, offer insight into the ways that 1960s Sierra Club conceptualized humanity and nature. Examining *This Is the American Earth* through the lens of the aforementioned critiques, one can indeed identify the mistrust or revulsion toward humankind that, I concur with Cronon, is a prominent undertone of the wilderness ethic.<sup>23</sup>

The authors open by describing man's ephemeral role in history, his position as a "Brief Tenant" on the planet. The verse provides a humbling timeline of human civilization, asking, "was it only six thousand years ago that beside great rivers—the Nile, the Tigris and Euphrates, the Yellow, the Indus—we began to build cities?" Humans had stood upright one million years before, had begun to raise cattle twenty thousand years ago, and had been agriculturalist for eight thousand years. Yet with these accomplishments came an ever-increasing series of environmental destruction and poor response management leading to collapse, the text argues. It goes on to

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<sup>23</sup> Ansel Adams and Nancy Newhall, *This Is the American Earth*, ed. David Brower (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1960).



invoke crowding and starvation in Egypt, droughts and bloody war in Mongolia, drowning floods in China, and famine in India. Opposite this textual litany are photographs of ancient ruins in Egypt, Athens, and Rome. An image labeled “Famine, India,” meanwhile, displays an elderly Indian woman holding a child, arms outstretched in supplication or anguish.<sup>24</sup> Societies had created an “exhausted, exasperated Europe...an age when even the memory of wilderness had vanished,” Newhall argues.<sup>25</sup>

In this manner, image and verse indicate that by the time Europeans reach the New World, they had already left a legacy of destruction to wilderness and their old civilizations. In contrast, the Americas represented a clean slate. Chapter 2, “New World,” opens with an image of expansive Atlantic waters, declaring, “Here still was Eden.”<sup>26</sup> Subsequent photos present the American National Parks, scenes from the Tetons, Yosemite, and Yellowstone. In America, “Any man with axe and gun could live/clear his own fields/hew his own home/win for himself/a long-forgotten birthright—independence.” This allusion to frontierism and Roosevelt’s rugged individualism is paired with a photograph of Moro Rock at Sequoia National Park, a magnificent landscape poised as synonymous with the experience of American freedom.<sup>27</sup>

The book paints a grimmer picture, however, in the third chapter. Entitled “The Machine and A New Ethic, text and image recount the ways in which the “brief tenants” had exploited America’s unique resources. Rather than reflecting on

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 3

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 9

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. 11

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 12

previous mistakes, “we built another Europe—felled trees, burned the forest clear.”<sup>28</sup> “Reckless,” the text explains, mankind “tore at the last great virgin resources.”<sup>29</sup> Images demonstrate a progression of landscape-altering activities: cattle ranching, mining, hunting, large agriculture, and logging; “Drilling for oil/ digging for coal and copper, we bored, blasted, dumped, devastated.” Here, the authors situate the frontier myth in a negative light, asserting that such destruction traveled “farther and farther West, higher and higher among its peaks.”<sup>30</sup> These activities so ravaged the nation’s topography that it provoked emergence of the conservation and preservation movements “to stop ruin, to save the nation.”<sup>31</sup>

But the fourth chapter laments that these events did not prevent the worst consequences of the human appetite for more and better. Explicitly apocalyptic, the chapter begins by listing pre-twentieth century predictions of the end of the world from “St. John the Divine,” to Dante and Milton.<sup>32</sup> Photo illustrates how pollution, smog, bulldozed forests, erosion, highways, dams, and housing developments infected the American landscape. “Hell we are building here on earth,”<sup>33</sup> the narrator confirms. A series of aerial photographs over Los Angeles housing developments show the expansive reach of these alterations, and then turning abroad, the page displays hundreds of Indians bathing in the Ganges River. Worldwide overpopulation and overdevelopment, Newhall and Adams argues, threaten the integrity of the earth and the happiness and health of humanity. Imagining the outcomes, they ask, “And

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 11

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 23

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. 17

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 28

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. 34

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 36

to what shabby hells of our own making do we rush? /A poisoned gutted planet,  
rolling through dark noxious airs?” The narration envisions:

—a [human] race that never breathed wild air, nor saw the sun shine clear,  
watched firelight dance, exulted in first snow, dreamed under trees, nor  
waded in bright seas?  
—a race that never knew delight, nor freedom, nor walked to think alone?<sup>34</sup>

Quality of life, based on the physical and spiritual nourishment of nature, would soon  
be lost if humans continued on their current trajectory, this passage suggests.

The final two chapters, in contrast, revisit the wonders of nature and  
wilderness. Photos again feature expansive forests, sparking coasts, and majestic  
mountains. “Pristine forever, now and for the unborn/let us keep these miracles, these  
splendors.”<sup>35</sup> The appearance of children in several of these images suggests the  
Eden narrative of innocent wonder. Narration expresses the hope that by using  
wilderness as a reference point, man can find an acceptable way to occupy the planet.  
“The wildernesses,” the poem contends, “holds answers to more questions than we  
yet know how to ask.”<sup>36</sup> Positioned next to a quiet forest scene, the book’s  
concluding words invite salvation through wilderness, advising, “Tenderly now let all  
men turn to the earth.”<sup>37</sup> These final passages intimate that humanity could, in fact,  
transcend the boundary of unnaturalness.

The man-wilderness distinction had already been quite clearly affirmed in  
earlier chapters, however. Phrases that proclaim, “Nature is wiser and nobler than

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 45

<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 74

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 62

<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 88

Man” express the dualism that casts man as nature’s moral inferior.<sup>38</sup> Certainly, he had represented a destructive force long before Europeans reached America; the narration laments, “Brief tenant! Already across the continents Man’s record of ruin lies very old.”<sup>39</sup> The editors cast “Man” as sometime villain, sometime tragic hero. Language and allusions are at times even more damning, implying unintended evil. At the start of the industrial revolution, the verse recounts, humans bargained with the devil “to harness the invisible, the intangible, the forces known by Satan, prince of the powers of the air/ to delve deep down for fuels, ores, metals, unknown except to alchemy.”<sup>40</sup> Religious overtones strongly refer to original sin, as the editors postulate that humans might turn to outer space “to seek...other worlds, new Edens, again to conquer, ruin and corrupt?”<sup>41</sup>

In this way, the text has rejected humanity with varying degrees of anti-humanism. The indictment against humanity is fairly general, furthermore. Photos and text do place an important emphasis on industrialization, describing mining, lumbering, welding, etc. Much of the narrative of human destruction, moreover, takes place in America. Yet by “The Mathematics of Survival,” the text has moved on from examining only America to a worldwide perspective, charging all of humanity with the crime of environmental destruction. Nowhere is this evinced more clearly than in the contiguous photographs of the Los Angeles housing development and Indian bathers. Such universalization of humanity as Man’s fatal

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 28

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 4

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 9.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.45

flaw, his desire for more and for better, had thus far doomed the planet to abuse and decay.

Jeffers' "Inhumanism" in the Sierra Club's *Not Man Apart*, 1964-65

The distrust of universal humanity evident in *This Is the American Earth* was not unacknowledged within club ranks, and in fact generated conflict on at least one occasion. In 1965, the Publications Committee was planning to publish *Not Man Apart*, another Exhibit Format book. The Sierra Club had published nine such collections in just five years. Featuring photographs of Camel-Big Sur Coast with lines from the recently deceased poet Robinson Jeffers, David Brower and the committee hoped that *Not Man Part* would galvanize support for the Club's campaign to protect the site.

Robinson Jeffers had died several years before Brower dreamed up *Not Man Apart*. Nevertheless, the book's narration consists exclusively of his poems, as compiled and sequenced by editors Brower and his son Kenneth. While the Browsers greatly revered Jeffers, Sierra Club Board member George Marshall regarded his poetry with suspicion. He complained to Brower that "much of Jeffers' writing strikes me as being anti-human or a-human and I should not like us to publish a book of this kind." Marshall expressed disgust over similarities he perceived to Jeffers' poetry and fascist rhetoric, invoking his own experience as a Jew in Nazi Germany. Board member Wallace Stegner also hesitated on the book, observing Jeffers' attachment to Nietzsche.<sup>42</sup> The poems, he noted, seem to suggest that instead of protecting the coast through legislation, people should "simply wade out and breathe

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<sup>42</sup> Cohen, *The History of the Sierra Club, 1892-1970*. 347

deeply.”<sup>43</sup> The Publications Committee finally decided by one vote to publish book during a meeting at the San Francisco airport, in which one of the dissenting opinions was not in attendance.<sup>44</sup>

A complex, elusive literary figure, Robinson Jeffers’ work lacks the sensationalism or transparency of the verse in *This Is the American Earth*. Literary critics have hotly debated the themes articulated in Jeffers’ poems, which frequently address the relationship between man and nature. Like many wilderness thinkers, Jeffers exulted in nature scenery and wildlife. Even more so than writers like Thoreau or Muir, however, Jeffers fixated on the vulnerable condition of wilderness, mournfully chronicling its disappearance. Loren Eiseley described that “with Jeffers...the American wilderness is dangerously close to sundown....Jeffers recognizes that we have treated American’s prodigal riches not with love, but as despoilers.”<sup>45</sup> Jeffers espoused, furthermore, a philosophy of “Inhumanism:” “a shifting of emphasis from the man to not-Man; the rejection of human solipsism and recognition of the transhuman magnificence of nature.”<sup>46</sup>

It is not the intention (nor within the scope) of this paper to evaluate the exact character of Jeffers’ “Inhumanism,” but rather to determine how the Sierra Club used Jeffers’ poems to advance its own narrative. Though Brower did not allude to the controversy surrounding *Not Man Apart*’s publication, his opening acknowledgments attempted to distance the Club from Jeffers’ potentially objectionable messages. He

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 348

<sup>44</sup> David Ross Brower, and Susan R. Schrepfer., "Environmental Activist, Publicist, and Prophet," in *Berkeley, Calif: Regional Oral History Office, Bancroft Library, University of California*. (1980). 212

<sup>45</sup> Robinson Jeffers, *Not Man Apart: Lines from Robinson Jeffers* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1965). 24

<sup>46</sup> Ian D. Copestake, "Jeffers and the Inhumanism of James Dickey's to the White Sea," *James Dickey Newsletter* 23, no. 1 (2006). 47-8

explained, “We could agree with Jeffers that man should ‘uncenter his mind from humanity,’ but would have to disagree about how far to uncenter. We could not stress that part of Jeffers that preached inhumanism--or that seemed to, in superficial reading.”<sup>47</sup> Eisley, in his foreword to *Not Man Apart*, accomplished a similar defense of using Jeffers’ poetry by underscoring Jeffers’ capacity for love.<sup>48</sup>

The collection’s title, *Not Man Apart*, deserves some attention. A reader unfamiliar with Jeffers’ body of poetry would likely interpret the phrase as “man should not consider himself as *apart* from nature.” A more subversive reading, however, might imply that “man is not *a part* of nature.” The title’s ambiguity is thus revealing, if not intentional. In reality, the phrase is taken from his poem “The Answer.”

...A severed hand  
Is an ugly thing and man dissevered from the earth and stars  
and his history... for contemplation or in fact...  
Often appears atrociously ugly. Integrity is wholeness,  
the greatest beauty is  
Organic wholeness, the wholeness of life and things, the divine beauty  
of the universe. Love that, not man  
Apart from that, or else you will share man's pitiful confusions,  
or drown in despair when his days darken.<sup>49</sup>

The speaker of *The Answer* condemns the corruptness of man’s separation from his surroundings. Only wholeness, like the “turn to nature” in *This Is the American Earth*, can supply relief from the “ugly” cycle. Jeffers did not detest humanity, this poem indicates, but rather its self-imposed separation from nature. It was this plea for

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<sup>47</sup> David Brower, "Acknowledgements," in *Not Man Apart* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1965). 26.

<sup>48</sup> Eisley, "Foreword." 24

<sup>49</sup> Robinson Jeffers, "The Answer," in *The Collected Works of Robinson Jeffers*, ed. Tim Hunt (Stanford: Stanford University Press).

“wholeness,” rather than the philosophy of Inhumanism, that Brower and Eisley emphasized in anticipation of humanists like Marshall and Stegner.

By not including “The Answer” in the collection, however, the Browsers left vague the meaning of “not man apart.” Moreover, the idea of “wholeness,” I argue, is subsumed by the theme of man’s betrayal throughout book’s narration. *Not Man Apart* begins by affirming the man-nature dualism in its opening chapter “Vulnerable beauty.” “The beauty of things/ Is in the beholder’s--the human mind’s translation/Of their transhuman/ Intrinsic value,” it reads.<sup>50</sup> The text has thus immediately distinguished between the “human mind” and “intrinsic value.” Idyllic images, as always, visualize this “intrinsic value,” displaying Big Sur Coast from a variety of impressive angles. The axiom from Newhall that “Nature is wiser and nobler than man” also materializes in this initial chapter of *Not Man Apart*. It narrates:

The nerves of men after the die dream dimly  
And dwindle into their peace; they are not very passionate,  
And what they had was mostly spent while they lived.  
They are sieves for leaking desire; they have many pleasures  
And conversations; their dreams too are like that.  
The unsocial birds are a greater race.<sup>51</sup>

Humans are fleeting beings, comparably passionless, and capricious, the chapter implies. As in *This Is the American Earth*, man is compared unfavorably to a more “natural” counterpart, in this case birds.

Through their placement of photographs and poems, the Browsers employed a dramatic shift in tone from chapter to chapter similar to that of *This Is the American Earth*. The second chapter is entitled “The Broken Balance,” and serves a similar

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<sup>50</sup> Jeffers, *Not Man Apart: Lines from Robinson Jeffers*. 44.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid. 76



purpose as “The Mathematics of Survival.” It begins with the stanza, “Mourning the broken balance/the hopeless prostration/of the earth/ Under men’s hands/ and their minds/ The beautiful places killed like rabbits to make a city....”<sup>52</sup> Initial photos display a burned snag, a dead pelican in oil spill, and smog surrounding Los Angeles. These “beautiful places” had indeed suffered “under men’s hands,” the juxtaposition implies.<sup>53</sup>

Selections from Jeffers’ poems “The Broken Balance,” and “Science” provide a dark founding narrative of the Americas, furthermore, not unlike that presented by Nancy Newhall’s verse. Settlers had left a record of abuse to the earth “like blades of knives; heartless machines;/ house of steel: using/ and despising the patient Earth/Oh, as a rich man eats a forest for profit and field for vanity.”<sup>54</sup> Again, man’s avarice and lack of foresight function as the story’s antagonist.

In the full poem “Passenger Pigeons” several pages later, these negative qualities are explicitly personified in the character of Man. “Passenger Pigeons” (named for an extinct species of bird) portrays a dialogue between “Man” and “Death,” in which Man challenges Death’s power, and tempts his wrath. Man scoffs:

...Respect humanity, Death, these  
shameless black eyes of yours,  
It is not necessary to take all at once—besides that  
you cannot do it, we are too powerful,  
We are men, not pigeons, you may take the old, the useless  
and helpless, the cancer-bitten and the tender young  
But the human race has still history make...<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 87

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. 87

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. 88

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 92

He goes on to list the achievements of humanity, its strength and creativity. Through this blind confidence in progress, the poem speaks to arrogance and naïveté in the face of a far greater, natural force. Death answers finally, pithily. “Oh,” he said, ‘surely/You’ll live forever’—grinning like a skull, covering his mouth/with his hand—‘What could exterminate you?’” The sardonic response is juxtaposed visually with a pelican floating dead in a stream. By believing himself exempt from natural processes, man leaves himself vulnerable to a day of reckoning with nature.

Chapter 2 concludes with the same full-page spread of Los Angeles sprawl from *This Is the American Earth*.<sup>56</sup> The book itself, moreover, ends with the same “turn to nature” strain. The last chapter, “Human Again,” resembles the tone of the first, displaying beautiful scenery and offering a veritable showcase of Jeffers’ nature poems. One reflects Jeffers’ frustration with his own unnaturalness, complaining, “I hate my verses, every line, every word./ Oh pale and brittle pencils ever to try/ One-grass-blade’s curve, or the throat of one bird.”<sup>57</sup> Beside an image of the seaside in autumn, the text cautions, “Turn outward, love things, not men, turn right away / from humanity.”<sup>58</sup> Passages like these rebuke the “poor doll humanity,” and urge a refocus on all things natural. The most optimistic lines reflect the speakers’ experiences of becoming whole with the natural world: “I was the stars....and I was the darkness.”<sup>59</sup> Finally, the book concludes, “A little too abstract, a little too wise, / It is time for us to

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 95

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 101

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 100

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 115

kiss the earth again.”<sup>60</sup> This conclusion neatly parallels the closing statement in *This Is the American Earth*: “Tenderly, let all men turn to the earth.”

Jeffers’ “return” to nature does not completely replicate Nancy Newhall’s “turn” to nature, however. He intimates, rather, that man was *once* a respectful and honorable citizen of the planet. This implication appears again in phrases like “Human Again” and “kiss the earth *again*.” Man had become an enemy by recently removing himself from nature’s balance, they suggest. While in this way Jeffers’ critique was perhaps more of modern man than of man in general, the distinction is quite subtle. The uniformity of the term “Man” in “Passenger Pigeons,” for instance, does not point merely to industrialized “Man,” even when it references inventions like electricity and the atom bomb. Such lack of nuance in *Not Man Apart* may also have resulted from the Browers’ editing, which at no point distinguishes between humans who are greater consumers and those consume less. Thus, I argue that both books characterize humanity as universal antagonists to nature.

But what of this “return to nature” strain that concludes both books? Each proposes that only a reconnection to humanity’s “wiser” counterpart can restore the “broken balance” and prevent man’s eventual downfall. This “turn” or “return” to nature is a pervasive theme in wilderness literature. It offers a means by which man can transcend his original sin, his proclivity towards destroying what is good and natural—perhaps break the dualism, if it is indeed self-imposed.

The ambiguity of such a proposition, however, leaves quite a few questions. How does the Sierra Club envision such a reconnection to nature? The reader might look to the narrative presented in the first chapters of *This Is the American Earth* and

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. 159

*Not Man Apart.* Should humans abandon agriculture, stop extracting metals from the earth, and return to hunting and scavenging? The Sierra Club's leaders had certainly never taken this position on the modern economy, but had focused most of their energies on political wilderness protection. Traditional wilderness thinking, it is clear from these texts, offered no coherent antidote to man's ungrateful, harmfulness behavior. Neo-Malthusian, I will demonstrate, provided a straightforward prescription for a problem that wilderness thinkers had long since identified—the destructiveness of individual human beings.

## Chapter 2

### The Critique of *The Population Bomb*

Sierra Club Books published *The Population Bomb* three years after *Not Man Apart* and eight years after *This is the American Earth*. All three were pet projects of executive director David Brower, who believed fervently in the power of books to generate emotional responses, and there political action. Ehrlich's text, however, differed markedly from the earlier collections of stirring images and prose. He himself provided an explanation for this new style: "In spite of all the efforts of conservationists, all the propaganda, all the beautiful writing, all the beautiful pictures, the conservation battle is presently being lost."<sup>1</sup> *The Population Bomb's* tone was one of urgency, underscoring its most crucial and apocalyptic warnings through repetition with the goal of alerting laypeople to overpopulation problems. Convinced that the majority of the American public "cannot be moved to action by an appeal to beauty," Ehrlich attempted to reach them through fear.

Indeed, the scientific language, straightforward rhetoric, and hard numbers of *The Population Bomb* provoked alarm and fascination on a scale that no Sierra Club publication had previously attained. This chapter will detail the reasons, posited by historians, for the book's popularity and influence at the end of the 1960s. Though *The Population Bomb* received only positive attention at first, various critical assessments of the book and of Neo-Malthusianism emerged over the course of several decades. I will outline these analyses, arguing that they can help illuminate *The Population Bomb's* enigmatic treatment of human communities

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<sup>1</sup> Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*. 66

I conclude by exploring the paradox in Ehrlich's rhetoric, which hovered between compassion and abandonment. Through evolutionary biology, Ehrlich defined two categories of humanity: responsible and irresponsible, salvageable and unsalvageable. The text thus urged the toleration of human suffering in the name of a greater, common good—a *controlled burn* that would sacrifice a few for the sake of the species. This proposition would produce racialized, dehumanizing language, despite its façade of universality. Biology, natural selection, and scientific inevitability were subsequently used to justify processes that were not natural at all, but would be imposed by American elites to the detriment of poor communities abroad.

#### *The Population's Bomb: Reception and Impact, 1968-70*

Central to defining the *The Population Bomb's* goals, message, and impact is to understand the sheer magnitude of its readership. As mentioned previously, the text had gone through twenty-two printings and had sold over a million copies less than two years after its printing. Total sales had reached over 2 million by 1974, surpassing Rachel Caron's *Silent Spring* as the best selling ecological text of the decade.<sup>2</sup> The book was meant to immediately sound the alarm on an urgent crisis, and would be promoted as such by the existing population-control movement. A full-page advertisement in the *New York Times*, paid for by the Campaign to Check the Population Explosion, said of *The Population Bomb*: "This may be the most

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<sup>2</sup> Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*. 256; Bender, "Immigration and the Environment: The Story of a Sierra Club Policy Initiative".

important book written in 1968.” The ad boasted that “Although the author is a scientist of repute, his book has all the excitement of a science-fiction thriller.”<sup>3</sup>

Ehrlich’s scientific credentials and candid style clearly impressed his formal reviewers as well. Book reviews of *The Population Bomb* generally eschewed a critical assessment in lieu of summarizing and praising Ehrlich’s project, without questioning its premises, validity, or tone.<sup>4</sup> The *New York Times* remarked that Ehrlich’s “pithy observations on how too many people have led to too much smog, too little beauty, too little water, too much death and general filth and famine make the impact of overpopulation frightening and clear....All in all, this is a concise and most welcome handbook on what is undoubtedly our planet’s most serious problem—to many people.”<sup>5</sup> *Publisher’s Weekly* declared it “a very skillful job of simplifying and dramatizing the population explosion.”<sup>6</sup>

The cultural and political context in which *The Population Bomb* was conceived certainly contributed to its monumental popularity. Unprecedented faith in government and science in the decades following the Great Depression and World War II gave American confidence in government population planning. Framed as apolitical, moreover, *The Population Bomb*’s political recommendations did not repulse either the Democratic or Republican parties.<sup>7</sup> Social movements, especially feminism and the sexual revolution, appeared to have common goals with

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<sup>3</sup> Display Ad 246 -- No Title. 1968. *New York Times* (1857-Current file), October 6, <http://www.proquest.com/> (accessed February 23, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> See "Book Review of Paul Ehrlich's the Population Bomb," *Choice* 5 (1969), ""Eco-Catastrophe!" " *Ramparts* (1969), "Review of the Population Bomb," *The Publisher's Weekly* 194 (1968), Webster, "Books of the Times: The Population Bomb, by Paul Ehrlich."

<sup>5</sup> Webster, "Books of the Times: The Population Bomb, by Paul Ehrlich."

<sup>6</sup> "Review of the Population Bomb."

<sup>7</sup> I will refer frequently in this chapter to Thomas Robertson’s dissertation on Neo-Malthusian environmentalism, which is unequalled in its scope and analysis. See Robertson, "The Population Bomb". 168

Neo-Malthusian population concerns as well. Women’s liberation groups did not specifically espouse population control, but indirectly promoted smaller families as a means of improving job opportunities for women. Birth control, other forms of contraception, and legal abortions were on the agenda of both groups.<sup>8</sup>

Ehrlich’s warnings of population-induced global conflict, moreover, resonated strongly with prominent anxieties in Cold War America. In each of his fifteen year “scenarios,” Ehrlich underscored for his readers the likely antagonism of the Soviet Union and China to the United States in the event of a worldwide war induced by resource scarcity.<sup>9</sup> The first two scenarios each envision nuclear war between these three powers; “The Chinese and the Russians jointly begin to establish missile bases and other military facilities throughout Latin America. They announce a new policy of containing American aggression.”<sup>10</sup> Yet it was not just the threat of the communist superpowers that these scenarios captured, however, but the looming specter of a hungry and covetous Third World. Each of the hypothetical nuclear wars begins with famine and food riots in China, India, Brazil, Mexico, Vietnam and Thailand. The book’s “what-ifs” reflects the American experience of fighting insurgencies in Vietnam, reminding readers how instability in the Third World could poignantly impact the lives of ordinary Americans.<sup>11</sup>

At home, meanwhile, mid-century internal demographic shifts resulted in heightened anxieties about the size—and composition—of the American populace. An article by the U.S. Department of Health’s Dr. Roger O. Egeberg explained:

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 140-1

<sup>9</sup> Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*. 72-80

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 77

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. 77



“While population growth in the underdeveloped and developing nations leads to famine and incredible poverty, growth of the U.S. population clearly threatens the quality of American life for this and future generations.”<sup>12</sup> The post-war Baby Boom had produced the largest generation in American history, validating the worst fears of Neo-Malthusian observers. Racial dynamics strongly contributed to these concerns, as the mid-twentieth century witnessed large-scale migrations of black southerners to urban centers in the north. This “Great Migration” would be countered by “white flight” to outlying suburbs. The replacement of open space with single family houses spoke to environmentalists of a population overflow (as evinced by *This American Earth*’s photograph of Los Angeles sprawl). Perhaps even more worrisome to many white Americans was the wave of racial urban rioting in the mid-1960s, beginning with the Watts Riot in 1965. Population planner such as John D. Rockefeller III, Hugh Moore, and Senator Ernie Gruening diagnosed the violence and poverty in the inner-city as symptoms of overpopulation in black urban communities. They recommended population control and family planning to Congress as a means of reducing urban strife and welfare rolls.<sup>13</sup>

The rise of a public environmental conscious following the publication of *Silent Spring* enhanced the public persona of the Neo-Malthusians as well. As the idea of environmental degradation and warnings about imminent ecological collapse gained a hold in popular discourse, pressure increased for scientists and other theorists to identify underlying root causes and antidotes. Because Neo-Malthusianism “offered an innovative and objective scientific diagnosis to an

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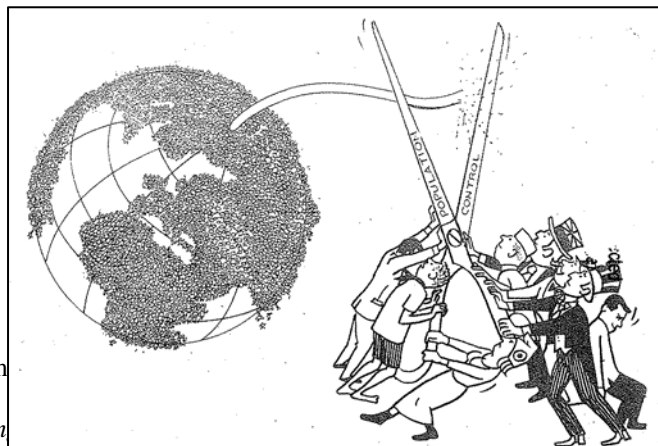
<sup>12</sup> Roger O. Egeberg, "Defusing the Population Bomb: New Role for Government," *Trial* 6, no. 5 (1970). 10

<sup>13</sup> Robertson, "The Population Bomb". 189.

intractable problem,”<sup>14</sup> overpopulation was put forth by many as the world’s primary cause of poverty and pollution. Again, the academic credentials of Neo-Malthusians like Ehrlich bolstered the movement’s stature. Fears of worldwide overpopulation were “not idle guesses, nor are they horror stories,” said *Trial Magazine*. “They are conclusions arrived at scientifically.”<sup>15</sup> The premise of overpopulation leading to scarcity was intuitive and rational for the ordinary observer, moreover. In *The Population Bomb*, Ehrlich berates scientists and politicians for studying and forming committees on the problem—which should have been common sense—rather than taking action.<sup>16</sup> Ehrlich did not deny that overconsumption in affluent countries contributed to the crisis, but he clearly subordinated it to overpopulation. By emphasizing sheer numbers of people rather than relative levels of consumption, Neo-Malthusianism helped absolve the industrial economy and American consumerism for the “crisis.” As one utilities representative asserted, “It is not industry per se, but the demands of the public....Population causes pollution.”<sup>17</sup>

The American government was often depicted as the lone stalwart against worldwide overpopulation, the only major obstacle in the overwhelming tide of uncontrolled reproductive. A cartoon in depicts an earth brimming with population, attached to a burning fuse. A

large scissors labeled “Population Control” is opened



<sup>14</sup> Ibid. 289

<sup>15</sup> Egeberg, "Defusing the Population Bomb"

<sup>16</sup> Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*. 82

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in Barry Commoner, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York: A. Knopf, 1972). 9

around the cord, poised to close in and prevent the coming explosion. On either side of the unwieldy scissors, a motley group crew attempt to push them together. This group includes Uncle Sam, several businessmen, a sailor, a worker, and a housewife. All are white, and as the Uncle Sam allusion suggests, all are also American.<sup>18</sup>

Ehrlich's call-to-action certainly reached official ears. While overpopulation had traditionally been the concern of academics and elites such as the Rockefellers, Ehrlich's book sparked the formation of grassroots population planning movement. Over 30,000 people joined the organization Zero Population Growth (ZPG) with Ehrlich as chairman, advocating for increased accessibility of family planning. It pushed for universal access to contraception, voluntary sterilization, and abortion. The group sought to create a congressional constituency to support its population control policies, including tax-incentives that would help achieve its objective of a 2-child family.<sup>19</sup> If public education leading to political activism had indeed been David Brower's main publishing objective, *The Population Bomb* was easily the most successful Sierra Club publication of the era.

While population issues had never before merited acknowledgment from politicians, Johnson and Nixon were both addressing it in their speeches by the 1960s. Politicians spotlighted not only population within the U.S., but America's responsibility to help stem the rising tide in the Third World. Johnson once remarked that 'five dollars put into birth control is more useful in Latin America than a hundred dollars invested in economic growth.'<sup>20</sup> Pressure mounted in Congress for international aid to encompass population control. As a result, funding increased

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<sup>18</sup> Egeberg, "Defusing the Population Bomb: New Role for Government."

<sup>19</sup> Ridgeway, *The Politics of Ecology*. 189

<sup>20</sup> Hans Magnus Enzenberger, "A Critique of Political Ecology," *New Left Review* 1, no. 84 (1974).

such that family planning programs made up two-thirds of international field assistance. The U.S. was also instrumental in launching a UN Fund for Population Activities, able to operate all over the world.” During this era, population planning emerged as a central tenet of US foreign policy development.<sup>21</sup>

### Paul Ehrlich’s Critics, 1969-1998

Despite its enormous popular success and almost immediate political impact, *The Population Bomb* and the ensuing wave of Neo-Malthusian fervor did face its share of detractors and skeptics. Critiques of *The Population Bomb* surfaced gradually from scientists, economists, political theorists, and social activists throughout the following decades. These objections came initially from the political left, though free market advocates would extend their assessments as well in the decades to follow. They would charge Ehrlich and other population leaders with having misrepresented the social and economic causes of environmental destruction; with reducing human beings to biological actors; with racist representations of Third World countries and inner-city neighborhoods; with exploiting white middle class fears of these communities; with alarmism and apocalypticism; with neglecting the health and free choice of women; and with unwisely rejecting technological advances as a means of solving environmental problems. Such commentaries are valuable to study in their own right, as an evolution of ideas that would detract significantly from the credibility of Neo-Malthusianism in America. I draw on them also as sources of greater insight into *The Population Bomb*’s underlying meaning and messages.

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<sup>21</sup> Matthew Connelly, "To Inherit the Earth. Imagining World Population, from the Yellow Peril to the Population Bomb," *Journal of Global History* 1, no. 3 (2006).

Finally, I argue that with the benefit of hindsight, these evaluations help shed light on the partnership between the Sierra Club and Paul Ehrlich.

Before the publication of *The Population Bomb*, population planners had already begun to face waves of criticism from black activists. During the 1960s, many Black Nationalist groups challenged the rise in government-sponsored family planning and birth control programs. The family planning push had appeared just as large numbers of African Americans had achieved suffrage through the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and in the absence of more comprehensive efforts to improve the health of poor communities. Suspicions were exacerbated by the Moynihan Report, which blamed racial rioting in part on the composition of black families. The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and some branches of the NAACP condemned family planning as a plot to limit the black population of the United States.<sup>22</sup>

Ehrlich's book would face early criticism from members of the environmental movement who did not concur with his emphasis on overpopulation. In April of 1971, ecologists Barry Commoner, Michael Corr, and Paul J. Stamler published a rebuttal to Ehrlich and his colleague Garret Hardin, making the beginning of a debate between Commoner and Ehrlich over the relative importance of population and industrial technology.<sup>23</sup> By plotting recent U.S. population growth and GNP against pollution increase, the authors of the article concluded that neither population growth nor rising affluence in America were adequate "to explain rising pollution levels." Rather, pollution was a consequence of "deliberate technological choices" that used

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<sup>22</sup> Robertson, "The Population Bomb".191-2

<sup>23</sup> Enzenberger, "A Critique of Political Ecology."

more paper, petroleum, cement, and synthetic materials.<sup>24</sup> Commoner argued that increased pollution in the U.S. could not be the result of population growth since pollution had risen much more quickly than had population.<sup>25</sup> His book *The Closing Circle* alluded to the importance of inequity and racism by implicating white flight to the suburbs in pollution<sup>26</sup>.

Many, such as New Republic Editor James Ridgeway, would concur with Commoner's dismissal of overpopulation, but emphasized overconsumption rather than technology as the root of environmental decline.<sup>27</sup> Ridgeway's 1970 *The Politics of Ecology* argued that the weight assigned to overpopulation for environmental problems unfairly blamed low-consuming communities, while absolving high-consuming ones. Charges against Neo-Malthusianism of racism and classism were quite apt, he concurred, tracing the origin population control to earlier eugenics movements. Ridgeway pointed to several newspapers advertisements that linked crime and urban violence directly to overpopulation.<sup>28</sup> He extended, moreover, this social critique of population control to the international context. Despite Ehrlich's warning about its "severe population explosion," India "contributes little or nothing to environmental pollution," wrote Ridgeway. He criticized population planners for promoting themselves as advocates for families while neglecting the need for wealth distribution to poor countries.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Endres, *On Defusing the Population Bomb*. 9

<sup>25</sup> Commoner, *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man and Technology*. 13

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* 135

<sup>27</sup> See Endres, *On Defusing the Population Bomb*.

<sup>28</sup> Ridgeway, *The Politics of Ecology*. 181-192. The advertisements to which Ridgeway alludes had been placed by the Campaign to Check the Population Explosion, an organization of which Ehrlich was a member and that had advertised his book.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 181-192

Population planning, meanwhile, was becoming a more and more prevalent aspect of American foreign policy by the early 1970s. Having encountered family planning programs in Indian villages, Mahmood Mamdani in 1972 challenged these tactics as a cure for Third World poverty in his book *The Myth of Population Control*. Mamdani began by highlighting Ehrlich's description of urban India in *The Population Bomb*, which he argued revealed a prejudiced, reductionist reading of the scene. "A hot summer night on Broadway in New York or Piccadilly Circus in London would put Ehrlich in the midst of a far larger crowd," said Mamdani. "With a little more concern and a little less fear he would have realized that what disturbed him about the crowd in Delhi was not its numbers, but its 'quality'—that is, its poverty." Ehrlich's preoccupation with sheer numbers was, said Mamdani, misleading. Neo-Malthusianism had fundamentally misconstrued the relationship between population and poverty, therefore falsely extolling population control as the cure. Rather, Mamdani argued, people were "not poor because they have large families," but rather had "large families because they are poor." Declining populations resulted from affluence, not efforts specifically aimed at population control. For this reasons, Mamdani wrote, family planning operations were neither curbing growth nor reducing poverty. If Neo-Malthusians were serious about fighting deprivation and hunger, they would need to reverse their approach.<sup>30</sup>

Criticisms from American black activists continued to arise, meanwhile. A public controversy emerged in 1969, when Ehrlich denounced EROS, a movement that aimed to increase the African American population. A year later in 1970, a

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<sup>30</sup> Mahmood Mamdani, *The Myth of Population Control: Family, Caste, and Class in an Indian Village* (New York, London: Montly Review Press, 1972). 14

people of color caucus walked out of a Population and World Resources Conference that Ehrlich's Zero Population Growth had organized. The conference, the caucus argued, "had failed to address the racial connotations of the issues under consideration."<sup>31</sup> *Ebony*, in 1974, published an article by Roy Innis that articulated suspicions of genocidal intent. Innis began by drawing a parallel between "population control" and the "urban renewal" efforts of the 1960s, which had really meant "Negro removal." The U.S. government had subsidized contraceptives in Ghana, he wrote, to the point where a contraceptive sponge cost far less than U.S. food produce. True population potential of Africans has been "hindered and frustrated by groups eager to limit and subjugate black populations. Innis was "alarmed by the high concentration of birth control centers and abortion clinics in black neighborhoods as well as more exotic proposals such as adding anti-fertility drugs to drinking water."<sup>32</sup>

In 1974, an article in the *New Left Review* contributed a Marxist perspective to this body of criticism. Hans Magnus Enzenberger argued in *A Critique of Political Ecology* that the class neutrality expressed by Ehrlich and other Neo-Malthusians—their conviction that environmentalism and population control benefitted everyone equally—served to disguise the true bourgeois interests of their program. Neo-Malthusianism had always relied heavily on the language of biology to assert the essential sameness of human organisms, wrote Enzenberger. By understanding all people as simple biological actors, "human ecology" neglected crucial roles of social

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<sup>31</sup> Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*. 258

<sup>32</sup> Roy Innis, "The Zero Population Growth Game," *Ebony*, no. November (1974).



and institutional constructs in the creation of poverty and ecological decline (specifically, for the Marxist Enzenberger, it neglected capitalism).<sup>33</sup>

The notion of ecological problems as “universal” would be invoked to validate the status quo and socioeconomic inequality, said Enzenberger. “Ecological crash programs,” such as that suggested by Ehrlich, were advertized as having universal benefits, yet they did nothing to challenge social institutions. Enzenberger explained therefore that, “a brake on population increase, de-development of the economy, draconian rationing, can now be presented as measures which, since they are offered in a spirit of enlightened, moral commonsense, and are carried out in a peaceful, liberal manner, harm no interests or privileges, and demand no changes in the social and economic system.”<sup>34</sup>

Finally, in equating the environment with *all* humans rather with human institutions, Enzenberger posited, ecology only reinforced existing inequalities. He returned here to the concerns of many earlier critics, in finding “irrational and racist traits” in Neo-Malthusian writings. The language of universality merely masked political intent to control certain population deemed dangerous, he asserted; literature about population had begun to appear more rapidly, Enzenberger remarked, just as liberation movements were emerging in Third World countries. He thus locates “strong political motivation and the irrational fears which are responsible for the massive attempt by official and private groups in the USA to export birth control to

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<sup>33</sup> Enzenberger, "A Critique of Political Ecology."

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

the countries of the Third World.”<sup>35</sup> Neo-Malthusianism was, in this view, a tool of ideological and political repression by imperialist powers.

Michael Endres, in his 1975 book *On Defusing the Population Bomb*, saw Neo-Malthusianism not so much as a plot of repression, but certainly viewed it as a reflection of cultural preoccupations, prejudices, and fears. Refocusing his commentary on the United States, Endres echoed Enzenberger’s allusion to “irrational fears” about inner-cities and the Third World. Neo-Malthusians had correlated population density with urban slums, crime, poor sanitation, said Endres. In this way, they had understood overpopulation as “a danger to a satisfying human existence.” Endres thus submitted a critique of Ehrlich’s focus on threats to quality-of-life. He argued that Neo-Malthusian anxieties responded not only to the threat of disobedience or uprising from deprived communities, as earlier critics had suggested, but to the danger of becoming *like* them.<sup>36</sup>

Endres rejected, moreover, the “crisis mentality,” and anti-technology thrust of *The Population Bomb*. Though they helped him attract an initial following, Ehrlich’s policy responses were irrationally designed because the threat of ecological crash was deemed so near, Endres argued.<sup>37</sup> Endres rebuked the “romantic overtones” in Ehrlich’s writings, which he equated with the conservation movement’s desire for return to simpler world. Ehrlich’s impractical and anachronistic distaste for technological solutions were unrealistic and self-defeating, Endres maintained, because “if technology fails to find genuine solutions to pollution and resource

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Endres, *On Defusing the Population Bomb*. 3

<sup>37</sup> Enzenberger, "A Critique of Political Ecology."

problems...it is unlikely that they will be found at all.”<sup>38</sup> Endres rebuffed Ehrlich for assuming a static level of technology and social change in his predictions for the future, as well as for his negative attitude toward its advancement.

By the late 1970s and early 1980s, feminists, once considered an ally of the Neo-Malthusians because of family planning programs, also began to challenge the treatment of women in population control models. The population movement had perceived women, theorist Gita Sen described, as mechanisms of reproduction, “the necessary locus of contraceptive technology and reproductive manipulation.” This position cast women as a “means to a demographic end,” and often ignores health and safety implications of contraceptive technology.<sup>39</sup> Sen stressed that the costs of limiting family size varied with social class and wealth disparity. Population control methods had been consequently neither successful, nor sensitive to the needs of the poor, especially to those of poor women.<sup>40</sup> The 1980s eco-feminist movement contributed its own skepticism. In 1988, eco-feminist Rachel Bagby linked the feminist and racial perspectives on population planning, explaining, “as a black woman, when I hear about population control I always ask who’s making the decisions and what populations are being controlled.”<sup>41</sup>

Ehrlich, to his credit, was sensitive and quite responsive to the charges of discrimination and elitism from his critics. By Earth Day 1970s, Ehrlich was placing more emphasis on American overconsumption rather than on a pure, worldwide

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<sup>38</sup> Endres, *On Defusing the Population Bomb*. 34

<sup>39</sup> Gita Sen, “Women, Poverty, and Population,” in *Population and the Environment*, ed. M. Priscilla Stone Lourdes Arizpe, and David C. Major (Boulder: Westview Press Co., 1994 ). 76. Eco-feminism emerging in the 1980s clearly influenced ideas about treating women’s bodies as machines. See Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (1980)

<sup>40</sup>

<sup>41</sup> “The Population Bomb: An Explosive Issue for the Environmental Movement ” *The Utne Reader*, no. May-June (1988).

population explosion. This analysis, however, would rather simplistically substitute “too-many-people” in the Third World with “too many” middle class Americans. It did not, therefore, reevaluate the Neo-Malthusian conception of poverty and scarcity. Nor did Ehrlich rescind his calls for abandoning food aid to selected, struggling countries like India.<sup>42</sup>

As Ronald Reagan took office in 1980, opponents of Neo-Malthusianism began to surface among members of the political right. Ehrlich’s theories received a sharp blow in 1981 with the publication of libertarian Julian Simon’s *The Ultimate Resource*. A “cornucopianist,” Simon saw no reason why food production could not keep up with increasing population. *The Population Bomb* had been alarmist and dead wrong, Simon argued. None of Ehrlich’s predictions had come to pass; quite to the contrary, famine had actually decreased worldwide since 1968, the price of raw materials had gone down, and the economy had prospered. Malthusianism, Simon criticized, did not account for humanity’s talent for technological innovation, which would surely find a way to replace nonrenewable resources like oil.<sup>43</sup> In 1980, Simon asked Ehrlich to choose five raw material resources, and bet him that in 1990, the prices of all five would have decreased. Ehrlich accepted the wager, chose chromium, copper, nickel, tin, and tungsten—and in 1990, sent a check in the mail for the amount the prices had descended.<sup>44</sup> Simon remained Ehrlich chief antagonist until his death in 1998. Their dispute between Ehrlich and Simon dominated the debate in the 1980s on population and the environment, offering two extreme positions: on one

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<sup>42</sup> Robertson, “The Population Bomb”. 236

<sup>43</sup> Taylor, *Our Limits Transgressed*. 40.

<sup>44</sup> Ed Regis, “The Doomslayer,” *Wired*, no. 5 (1997).

hand, the apocalyptic positions of demographic and ecological collapse, and on the other, an affirmation of capitalism and innovation to cure all environmental ills.

Both Simon and Ehrlich's perspectives would face extensive criticism as being simplistic, as not acknowledging the full complexity of demographics and political structures. Population, they urged, should not be posited as a "simple surrogate for environmental transformation."<sup>45</sup> In his 1998 *The Malthus Factor*, anthropologist Eric Ross argued that in fact, Malthusianism and capitalism had always worked in tandem. Malthus's "so-called law of population acquitted the property-owning product of the fertility of the poor, rather than of the social of economic system. The solution therefore was a matter of individual, not systematic, responsibility."<sup>46</sup> Tracing Malthusian analyses since from the Irish Potato Famine, to Eugenic movements, to the Cold War, to land reform and global trade policies, Ross explained how Malthusian principles were used to avoid addresses social inequalities. Like Enzenberger, Ross believed that Malthusianism and capitalist interests had worked hand and hand to thwart revolution and secure the status quo. Malthusianism had accomplished "the view that poverty is 'natural.'"<sup>47</sup> The idea that of poverty as a "natural" consequence of overpopulation, I will demonstrate, permitted Ehrlich to justify harsh policy measures toward poor populations.

### *The Population Bomb and Evolutionary Biology*

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<sup>45</sup> Margarita Velaquez Lourdes Arizpe, "The Social Dimensions of Population," in *Population and the Environment*, ed. M. Priscilla Stone Lourdes Arizpe, and David C. Major (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994). 23

<sup>46</sup> Eric B. Ross, *The Malthus Factor: Poverty, Politics, and Population in Capitalist Development* (New York: Zed Books, 1998).5

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 3

Each of these commentaries helped tear at the fabric of Neo-Malthusianism, diminishing its credibility during the decades after its publication.<sup>48</sup> *The Population Bomb* has only quite recently become a subject of inquiry for environmental and political historiography. In his 2005 *The Population Bomb: Population Growth, Globalization, and American Environmentalism, 1945-1980*, Thomas Robertson examined the origins of the Neo-Malthusian environmentalism and the cultural context in which it emerged. Robertson's dissertation is part of a recent trend among a group of historians who have taken an unorthodox, critical look at the environmental movement.<sup>49</sup> Tellingly, Robertson's work was supervised by William Cronon, whose essay "The Trouble With Wilderness" was discussed in Chapter 1. I will elaborate on the overlaps between their arguments in Chapter 3.

Robertson's main contention is that *The Population Bomb* helped redefine environmentalism, a movement traditionally associated with rising affluence and a push for higher standards of living, by eliciting fears about a *diminished* quality of life brought on by environmental decline. The anxiety was almost always linked to the Third World and to urban centers in the United States, Robertson argues. Thus, while Ehrlich and other Neo-Malthusians made an important contribution by alerting America to growth limits, they also played on deeply racial and nationalistic prejudices to justify an authoritarian program of population control.<sup>50</sup>

The biological sciences played an important role in Ehrlich's understanding of population and human societies, says Robertson. Similarly to Enzenberger's 1974

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<sup>48</sup> My conclusion will elaborate on Neo-Malthusianism's decline, lingering influence, and comebacks.

<sup>49</sup> I include in this category Martin Melosi, Robert Gottlieb, and William Cronon, as presented in Chapter 1.

<sup>50</sup> Robertson, "The Population Bomb".

paper, Robertson asserts that biological principles employed by Neo-Malthusians reduced humanity to simplistic, biological actors. Ehrlich had begun his career in evolutionary biology by studying communities of snakes, Robertson notes. From this experience Ehrlich took several important notions about human ecology, including straightforward relationships between food and population: with more organisms, there was less food and more competition for survival. Evolutionary biology also impressed upon him homogeneity of animal species. Robertson explained that, “Ehrlich’s model stressed that all humans were members of the same species equally dependant upon natural resources.”<sup>51</sup>

It was through the biological lens that Ehrlich diagnosed poverty in India and in U.S. urban centers as a symptom of population stress. India, for Ehrlich, embodied the worldwide overpopulation dilemma. He would use the country, and particularly the famine it has suffered in 1965, as a metaphor for the instability, squalor, and diminished quality of life that resulted from too many people—the best proof that “a high quantity of life endangered the high quality of life.”<sup>52</sup> *The Population Bomb’s* opening anecdote implied that overpopulation alone explained the poverty, overcrowding, and lack of sanitation that Ehrlich and his family observed in New Delhi. Neo-Malthusians, moreover, extended the same principle to explain poverty within America’s inner-cities, Robertson contends.<sup>53</sup> Robertson’s argument here parallels Ross’s contention, that Malthusians saw poverty as “natural” consequences of population pressures.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid. 190

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 180

<sup>53</sup> Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*. 180

“Reducing history to biology,” Robertson argues, made Ehrlich mischaracterize the causes of both Third World indigence and urban American unrest. By applying basic biological principles to human societies, Robertson observes, Ehrlich neglected crucial differences among them. This same conception of biological uniformity blinded Ehrlich and many liberals of the era to the vast differences created by historical inequalities, as well as to the racial and class implications of their population control programs. Ehrlich had been a staunch Civil Rights activist in the early 1960s, and launched his career by arguing against biological bases for race. Science proved that all humans were the same, that none were intellectually or morally superior to another, Ehrlich had argued.<sup>54</sup> Through simplistic analysis of humans as biological beings, furthermore, Ehrlich overlooked specific social structures that often produced scarcity and environmental degradation. His purely Malthusian reading of India’s famine, for instance, ignored the British trade policies which had inflated the price of food, as well as the recent Partition’s effect on agricultural output.<sup>55</sup> As critics such as Ridgeway and Enzenberger highlighted, deprivation could not be described just in terms of numbers. Yet for Ehrlich, “biology, and biology alone, had the answers to India’s woes.”<sup>56</sup>

Neo-Malthusianism, Robertson asserts, not only misdiagnosed the cause of deprivation in the Third World and American cities, but turned the responsibility for poverty inward. *The Population Bomb*’s representation of India was indicative of a more general “blame-the-victim” approach to poverty, Robertson posits. Excessive reproduction caused and perpetuated material deficiency in these countries, Neo-

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<sup>54</sup> Robertson, “The Population Bomb”. 171

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. 129

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. 164



Malthusianism postulated, assigning the fault for poverty on the poor themselves.<sup>57</sup> *The Population Bomb*, moreover, suggested a lurking threat to middle class Americans from these overly reproductive societies. Robertson comments on the depiction of a small, ie. *productively responsible*, white family staring outside their car in New Delhi, “frightened” by what they observe in the urban, Third World.<sup>58</sup> In this way, Ehrlich’s racialized description of Delhi reflected concerns about “poverty-induced instability” abroad *and* at home. Robertson asks, “Could Ehrlich’s vignette be seen not just as an analogy for how the U.S. was threatened by overcrowded Third World nations, but also for how affluent white families felt under siege by the poor and non-white of America?” All of these things seemed to threaten both the immediately safety and the “quality of life” of white, middle class Americans.<sup>59</sup>

#### Compassion v. Survival in *The Population Bomb*

Drawing on this body of critical perspectives, I will examine what I argue represents *The Population’s Bomb’s* most revealing incongruity. The text’s central focus on human suffering clashes strikingly with its most radical recommendation to halt food aid to struggling nations. Ideas from the above commentaries about Neo-Malthusian—its use of biology, its representations of race, class, and nationality, and its anxieties about diminished quality-of-life—help to elucidate how *The Population Bomb* justified its most uncompassionate proposition.

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 96

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. 181

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. 180

To accuse Paul Ehrlich of being indifferent to human life would be to ignore his main motivation for writing the book. Instances of human suffering from Ehrlich's research and personal experience had upset him deeply, according to Robertson. They feature prominently in *The Population Bomb*'s first chapter, "The Problem," where Ehrlich devoted an entire section to scenes of poverty abroad to demonstrate "the misery and despair in which so many of our southern neighbors spin out their lives."<sup>60</sup> Approximately 3.5 million would starve to death in 1968, he contended. Ehrlich wrote that Peruvian children chewed coca leaves to dull their hunger pains, and that in Dar es Salaam, 30% of children under five were malnourished. Deprivation took its psychological as well as physical toll, he explained, lamenting that women in Colombia were frequently driven to suicide by the financial burden of large families children.<sup>61</sup> By writing *The Population Bomb*, Ehrlich hoped to help avert more of such pain from scarcity, deprivation, and conflict.

Yet these descriptions also formed the central tension in Ehrlich's paradigm. Humans had placed themselves in this pitiable position by overpopulating the globe, the text argued. Their numbers had brought them out of line with a healthy balance between the birth rate and the death rate.<sup>62</sup> Through their own desire to reproduce and to stay alive for longer, humans were causing not only their own suffering, but threatening those on the other side of the world. In this light, it becomes less clear how Ehrlich expected his readers to react to the hungry children Peru, or the desperate mothers in Columbia. With sympathy? Anxiety? Horror?

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<sup>60</sup> Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*. 40

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. 42.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 34

One of *The Population Bomb*'s textual oddities is the contrast of Ehrlich's expression of compassion for poor people with the cold scientific distance he adopts toward them at other times. Enzenberger and Robertson each highlighted Ehrlich's conception of mankind as equal, biological actors. Throughout the text, the predicament of world populations consistently returned to the simple ratio of food to people, a dilemma which faltering ecological systems only exacerbated. "After all," wrote Ehrlich, "no matter how you slice it, population is a numbers game."<sup>63</sup> Unfortunately, he argued, the problem had progressed far beyond a "birthrate solution" of limiting reproduction; "It now seems inevitable that [the population crisis] will continue to its logical conclusion: mass starvation." Ehrlich's certainty that a "death rate solution" would inevitably come to fruition evinced his faith in evolutionary biology, particularly in the concept of natural selection.

The book's recommendations regarding food aid likewise express the immutability, in Ehrlich's mind, of certain ecological processes. Ehrlich likened this plan to the system of "triage" in military medicine, in which doctors distinguished between patients who would survive even without attention, those who would live only with immediate care, and "those who will die regardless of treatment." Extrapolating this life/death scenario to entire countries, Ehrlich called this the "last tragic category: those countries that are so far behind in the population-food game that there is no hope that our food aid will see them through to self-sufficiency."<sup>64</sup> India and East Pakistan, he determined, were two such hopeless cases. Both would soon face the unavoidable consequences of their ever-increasing populations, as

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 17

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 160

demonstrated by the recent famine in India, with or without resource supplementation from developed countries.<sup>65</sup> For Ehrlich, food aid from the U.S. merely delayed the unavoidable process of natural selection on the international scene. “It is now too late to take action to save many of these people,” he explained.<sup>66</sup> Trying to save them only threatened to deplete the already endangered resources that Americans desperately needed to survive.

Thus for Ehrlich, ecological inevitability trumped humanitarianism. The fact that a large portion of the world’s population would die of famine or scarcity-induced conflict were scientifically incontrovertible; the only remaining question were how much and when. Ehrlich hoped to spare as many human lives as mathematically possible. His third and best-case “scenario”, therefore, “has considerably more appeal than the other [scenarios], even though it presumes the death by starvation of perhaps as many as half a billion people, one-fifth of the world population.”<sup>67</sup> The *inevitability* of scarcity and the *urgency* of action (what Enzenberger termed Ehrlich’s “ecological crash course”) resolve the paradox between compassion and abandonment, for Ehrlich; “I know this all sounds very callous, but remember the alternative,”<sup>68</sup> he reminds readers.

Yet despite Ehrlich’s confidence in human ecology, the text does not rely on these theories alone to sway readers to its international program. With or without realizing it, Ehrlich drew on a wealth of racial and national prejudices to psychologically distance his readers from the populations he saw as biologically

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 159

<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 17

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 80

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 165

hopeless. These characterizations set up the reader for a series of emotional responses—revulsion, jealousy, contempt, and fear—ultimately anesthetizing his readers to the book’s most “callous” proposals.

The text accomplishes this in several ways. Despite what appears to be compassionate appeals, Ehrlich’s language often has the effect of dehumanizing the “suffering” communities by emphasizing their woeful existences. Sweeping generalizations about quality of life, health, and happiness of Third World populations separates them starkly from the high living standards of American readers. He explained, “In all of the mess of expanding populations, faltering food production and environmental deterioration are enmeshed miserable, hungry, and desperate human beings.”<sup>69</sup> “Undeveloped countries (UCDs)” are in themselves defined by their misfortune; although “technically” the term refers to countries that “are not industrialized, tend to have inefficient agriculture, very small gross national products, high illiteracy rates and related problems,” Ehrlich declared that a “short definition of undeveloped is ‘starving.’”<sup>70</sup> Such wretchedness marks almost every depiction of life in UCDs. The account of mothers driven to suicide begs the question: do they even want to stay alive? Despite an outward show of sympathy, these descriptions present life so hopeless, so unsatisfying that they hardly seem worth saving.

The text further distances its American, eco-minded readers from poor communities abroad by explicitly dividing humanity into two camps—“responsible” and irresponsible. Within the U.S., Ehrlich explained, “our population consists of

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid. 42

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. 22

two groups: a comparatively small one devoted to the preservation of beauty and wildlife, and a vastly larger one dedicated to the destruction of both (or at least apathetic to it).”<sup>71</sup> The text later expands this definition to encompass the *reproductively* responsible; it recommended that the federal government penalize parents of large families, who are “getting their pleasure from their children, who are being supported in part by more responsible members of society.”<sup>72</sup> This small-family distinction, moreover, tends to situate Third World families in the selfish, overly reproductive segment of the population. As Robertson shows, Ehrlich’s depiction of his one-child family staring at the urban masses in Delhi neatly separated them from the tangle of people outside their car. Ehrlich explained with irritation, “The story in the UDCs is depressingly the same everywhere—people *want* large families. They *want* families of a size that will keep the population growing”<sup>73</sup>

This reckless community, Ehrlich revealed, had persisted mainly by relying on the generosity of the other half. Critics have drawn attention to Ehrlich’s “blame-the-victim” approach to poverty and disparity, which absolved the privileged for the woes of poor communities. Robertson describes Ehrlich’s depiction of his own family, as compared to the Indians they encountered: “They had been responsible in their family planning; thus they had a moral claim to their privileges, while the poor people outside the car had little to blame except their own reproductive recklessness.”<sup>74</sup> This proposition is clearly at work in Ehrlich’s explanation of India’s scarcity problems as well. The Indian government, he asserted, had predicted over a decade before the

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 66

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 141

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. 83

<sup>74</sup> Robertson, “The Population Bomb”. 180

famine of 1965 that it would experience serious food shortage. Nonetheless, it “blames its current problems on bad monsoons.” Despite an acknowledgement that an unfortunate monsoon season “indeed did occur”, Ehrlich saw the explanation as shirking responsibility for its underlying inability to produce enough food for its population.<sup>75</sup> “Perhaps we gave too many Indians the impression that we have an unlimited capacity to ship them food. Unhappily, we do not.”<sup>76</sup> The Indian populace had for too long freeloarded on American largesse, the text intimated, without which it could not exist.

But much more ominously, the irresponsible countries posed an actual threat to the quality-of-life and political stability of ordinary Americans. Could the First World degenerate into the Third World, the text asks? Urban centers in America suggested that it could. With contempt, Ehrlich described “the mixture of filth that is labeled as ‘air’ in places like Los Angeles, St. Louis, and New York.”<sup>77</sup> Crowding brought on by overpopulation threatened the health of happiness of all inhabitants, he argued; “the effects of crowding are often confounded by poverty, poor diet, unattractive surroundings, and other related phenomena.”<sup>78</sup> This vision of overpopulation, as Robertson notes, would have reminded its readers of urban, racial riots in communities within the U.S.<sup>79</sup> Ehrlich asks, “Are we living in a deteriorating ‘psychic environment?’ Riots, rising crime rates, disaffection of youth, and increased drug usage seems to indicate that we are.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*. 161

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* 38

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* 59

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* 168

<sup>79</sup> Robertson, "The Population Bomb". 193

<sup>80</sup> Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*. 64

Still more terrifying than these material and “psychic” threats, the book implies, were the possible political consequences of overpopulation. As noted above, resource exhaustion and scarcity-induced world war each figured prominently in Ehrlich’s three “scenarios.” The deprivation of the Third World and inner-cities—two potent images for readers who were witnessing the war in Vietnam and urban riots—thus shifted from sad to menacing. As Ehrlich asked, “Will they starve gracefully, without rocking the boat? Or will they attempt to overwhelm us in order to get what they consider to be their fair share?”<sup>81</sup> In one of his scenarios, the Soviet Union and a group of suffering Third World countries accuse the U.S. of “eating meat while the hungry of the world lack bread”—of course, at this stage in the population crisis, Americans had no meat either. Covetous populations abroad could cause a nuclear World War III, *The Population Bomb* said, from which comfortable American lives would not be shielded.<sup>82</sup>

Each of these themes—biological inevitability, dehumanization, distancing, assigning blame, and correlations to cultural anxieties—prepares the reader for Ehrlich’s recommendation to abandon food aid to certain Third World countries. Thus, despite Ehrlich’s depiction of human misery in what seems to be sympathetic language, the flippancy exhibited in his recommendation to end foreign aid to “hopeless” countries becomes less jarring, less shocking--even reasonable. This “radical surgery” gives the “patient” a chance of survival—a preemption of the natural death rate process.<sup>83</sup> Ehrlich did not see that he would be making this choice

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 133

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. 75

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. 67



himself, but that he would be taking care of what biology would eventually do anyway.

Yet what Ehrlich saw as natural selection would actually signal a conscious decision by an elite group of people against those already deemed as the “other” due to their class, race, or nationality. Having assigned the right of ecological anticipation to the American government, Ehrlich also grants it to the means of enforcement. Discussing population control *within* the United States, he treads carefully on suggestions that might be identified as authoritarian, hinting at controversial tactic without explicitly espousing them. “Many of my colleagues feel that some sort of compulsory birth regulation would be necessary to achieve such control,” he writes, letting the idea air without actively endorsing it.<sup>84</sup> The possibility of adding sterilants to water supplies is rejected due to technological limitation, moreover, not because of political objection. Ehrlich showed much less timidity about enforcing population control in the Third World, in contrast. In India, Ehrlich regretted that the United States did not seize upon the suggestion to sterilize all Indian males with more than three children, apply pressure on its government, and send American volunteers and doctors to perform operations. “Coercion?” Ehrlich asked. “Perhaps, but coercion in a good cause.” Potentially authoritarian, these measures would be instituted by a scientifically enlightened America to ensure the welfare of everyone.

In summary, Ehrlich’s authorship of *The Population Bomb* demonstrated his genuine commitment to alleviating poverty and deprivation in all human communities: “Remember, above all, that more than half of the world is in misery

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.135

now. That alone should be enough galvanize us to action.”<sup>85</sup> His absolute confidence in human ecology, however, made this goal realizable only by achieving a stable population. The same principle convinced Ehrlich and other Neo-Malthusians that humans would very soon face a reckoning with long-postponed natural processes—a “death rate” solution—regardless of what action was taken. Showing compassion through aid would thus be the least compassionate act, for it would sentence to death a much later part of humanity. Perhaps more than he realized, Ehrlich’s text exploited cultural fears and prejudices of the day to win the reader to its methods. Finally, Ehrlich’s understanding of *natural* processes in fact represents the *choices and wills* of a privileged group of people, as demonstrated by his willingness to vest worldwide population control in American institutions.

Moreover, as Robertson explains, Ehrlich’s approach to world population “blamed the victims” of historical inequalities and prejudice for their own poverty. Biology permitted Neo-Malthusians to perpetuate these differences while proclaiming the sameness of the human species. Through these analyses, it becomes clear how Ehrlich’s prominence in the environmental movement could lead observers like Ridgeway and Enzenberger to see the entire movement as noxious, elitist, and authoritarian.

Historians Ramachandra Guha and William Cronon, introduced in Chapter 1, had similar observations about the influence of “wilderness” on American environmentalism. The overlaps between the two critical analyses can help us understand the link between the Sierra Club’s wilderness thinking and Paul Ehrlich’s Neo-Malthusianism. The next chapter will deal with the myriad levels on which

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid. 190

these two movements found common ground and influenced each other. Neo-Malthusianism's dependence on biology, on racial representations, on differentiation and on American privilege had already appeared in *This Is the American Earth*, accomplishing the same distancing visually that *The Population Bomb* accomplished textually. Many of these themes would resurface, moreover, during the Wilderness Conference of 1969, where Ehrlich gave the keynote address.

## Chapter 3

### The Appeal of Neo-Malthusianism, 1960-1969

Slightly over a year after David Brower had commissioned, published, and contributed the foreword to Paul Ehrlich's most successful book, Ehrlich presented the keynote address at the Sierra Club's 1969 annual Wilderness Conference. Though representing two rather disparate strains of environmental thought, the Club had broadly adopted Ehrlich's Neo-Malthusian worldview by this point. The distinction between the American wilderness tradition and Neo-Malthusianism became less and less during these formative years of the modern environmental movement. For many observers, "environmentalism" would be identified with this poignant blend of scientific pragmatism and romantic wilderness writing.

The previous chapters outlined prominent criticisms of wilderness-thinking and Neo-Malthusianism, focuses particularly on their conceptions of humanity and treatment of human communities. In this chapter, I will demonstrate the ways in which Neo-Malthusian ideas influenced Sierra Club rhetoric during decisive years for the American environmental movement, starting from *This Is the American Earth* in 1960 and ending with the Wilderness Conference of 1969. The partnership was evinced literarily by the powerful blend of Neo-Malthusian alarmism with a more romantic, preservationist tradition. I will explore the numerous reasons for which two movements became so closely entangled. In particular, I will draw on the critiques presented in Chapters 1 and 2 to argue that both outlooks posited the universality of man, and specifically, the universality of man's destructiveness. The anti-humanism

associated with wilderness-thinking thus found its counterparts in Ehrlich's biological outlook of humanity, I contend. This common impulse allowed the Club to accept or even approve Ehrlich's proposed abandonment of human communities.

### Romanticism and Alarmism: The Influence of Neo-Malthusianism

As early as 1960, the *mélange* of Neo-Malthusianism and wilderness thinking can be seen in *This Is the American Earth*, where their powerful strains of romanticism and alarmism blended to create a unique narrative voice. Told through verse and image, forms associated with wilderness-thinking, the chapter "The Mathematics of Survival" in fact voices harshly biological Neo-Malthusian warnings. Its narrations issues pleas for the salvation of majestic landscapes, alongside warnings of war and famine. Newhall describes "scientists tracing from present face the cold trajectories of the future....sitting together to consider/the mathematics of survival," an allusion to those like Ehrlich and his contemporaries.<sup>1</sup> Where Ehrlich would later employ statistics and rational speculation, Newhall's text uses emotion and religious metaphor to conjure ideas of the future. She prophesizes, "We have seen massacre swollen to genocide, tortures learned from healing...More dreadful than the ancient fearful riders, Famine and Pestilence....dooming--perhaps already--how many forms of life/to cancerous corruptions and to monstrous births?"<sup>2</sup> The book combined the emotional appeals of wilderness writing—awe, nostalgia, mourning, and anger at man's incompetence—with the scientific and apocalyptic predictions of Neo-Malthusians. Unlike the paperback *The Population Bomb* several years later, the

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<sup>1</sup> Newhall, *This Is the American Earth*. 34

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 35

authors could use images of crowds, smoggy landscapes, and expansive development sprawl to *illustrate* a story about the *opposite* of wilderness, about poor humans packed together into small spaces.<sup>3</sup>

The narration of Robinson Jeffers in the Club's 1965 *Not Man Apart* similarly fused dire calculations with emotional appeals and nature metaphors. The biologicization of humanity is achieved by comparing human populations to fish caught in a net:

The circle is closed, and the net  
Is being hauled in. They hardly feel the cords drawing, yet  
they shine already. The inevitable mass-disasters  
Will not come in our time nor in our children's, but we and our children  
Must watch the net draw narrower, government take all powers—  
or revolution, and the new government  
Take more than all, add to kept bodies kept souls--or anarchy,  
the mass disasters<sup>4</sup>

Jeffers' allusion to governments, revolution, anarchy, and "mass disasters," mirrored *The Population Bomb's* own political imagination. The analogy of a closing net, moreover, linked it to Ehrlich's rhetoric of a shrinking system, a sinking ship. In making humans analogous to fish, *Not Man Apart* presaged Ehrlich's comparison of humanity to rats in *The Population Bomb*.<sup>5</sup>

This distinctive synthesis of Neo-Malthusian/wilderness thinking had remained quite forceful by 1969, for the Club's 11<sup>th</sup> annual Wilderness Conference. A year after the *The Population Bomb's* publication, population control would appear as one of the Sierra Club conference's overarching themes. Judge Raymond J.

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<sup>3</sup> The connection between these photographs and *The Population Bomb* was called to my attention by Thomas Robertson's "The Population Bomb: Population Growth, Globalization, and American Environmentalism." Matthew Connelly also addresses it in his article, "To Inherit the Earth." See Robertson, "The Population Bomb". and Connelly, "To Inherit the Earth. Imagining World Population, from the Yellow Peril to the Population Bomb."

<sup>4</sup> Jeffers, *Not Man Apart: Lines from Robinson Jeffers*.

<sup>5</sup> Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*. 168

Sherwin indicated its increasing emphasis in his address to the conference: “The nature of the discussion, in fact, seldom now concerns whether it is desirable to control population; rather, it concerns practical means of accomplishing what almost everyone now concedes to be necessary if the human race is to survive with sanity and inhabit a tolerable environment.”<sup>6</sup> The conference was divided into two segments; first, a discussion of wilderness values and the Alaska wilderness campaign, and secondly, a smaller portion on, what Club President Edgar Wayburn deemed, the “world conservation and population battle”<sup>7</sup> This format, on one hand, neatly separated wilderness from Neo-Malthusian environmental topics of the day, such as population and pollution. On the other hand, it allowed speakers to draw a direct link between wilderness protection and overpopulation, a relationship that many club members saw as extremely important.

Ehrlich opened his keynote address, entitled “Population and Conservation: Two Sides of a Coin,” by reviewing the population crisis for the conference attendees. “Perhaps the most serious aspect of the current population-environmental crisis is the continuing delusion, particularly among economists, demographers, and politicians, that environmental problems can in some way be separated from the population explosion.”<sup>8</sup> Ehrlich discussed the relationship between population, environmental deterioration, and world food production, the strain on agriculture, the pitfalls of chemical pesticides and fertilizers, and the futility of relying on “food from the sea” or the Green Revolution. He pointed again to India, arguing that the “high

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<sup>6</sup> Raymond J. Sherwin, "Introduction " in *Wilderness: The Edge of Knowledge*, ed. Maxine E. McCloskey (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1969). 209.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Ehrlich, "Population and Conservation: Two Sides of a Coin," in *Wilderness: The Edge of Knowledge*, ed. Maxine E. McCloskey (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1969). 10.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* 3

yields that occurred in 1967-68” were not due to agricultural technology, but rather “extremely good weather.” The threat of too many people and food shortage remained graver than ever.<sup>9</sup>

Ehrlich’s speech preceded a series of talks on wildlife, wilderness legislation, Alaskan geography, and musings on wilderness philosophy. The incompatibility of man with nature, these lectures evinced, still delineated the boundaries of “wilderness” for Sierra Club preservationists; Geographer Richard Cooley here defined wilderness as “as a place where the hand of man has never set foot.”<sup>10</sup> The conference’s final segment, entitled “Wilderness Planning and People,” returned it to Neo-Malthusian themes. Judge Sherwin remarked that “without population control, other conservation measures were futile.” The ineffectiveness of family planning suggested that the effort needed more research and new methods, Sherwin argued, echoing *The Population Bomb*. Sherwin shared Ehrlich’s analysis of poverty, commenting “there are some of those who have seen their efforts to relieve the degrading effects of poverty frustrated by unrestrained reproduction.”<sup>11</sup>

The Conservation Foundation’s John P. Milton delivered a speech entitled “Earth: The End of Infinity,” whose tone channeled *The Population Bomb*’s apocalypticism. Milton warned, “The end could come could come quickly, in a flash of thermonuclear fire, or slowly, through the quiet squeeze of a million small pollutions, and lurking behind each of these possibilities is the growing specter of crowding, disease, malnutrition, and starvation for an increasing majority of

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 8

<sup>10</sup> Richard Cooley, "Introduction to Part 2," in *Wilderness: The Edge of Knowledge*, ed. Maxine E. McCloskey (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1969). 53

<sup>11</sup> Sherwin, "Introduction ". 209



mankind.” Population control constituted the first of eight steps Milton recommended to stave off the ecological crisis. The U.S. would have to emerge as a leader in reducing its population, he argued, because “until we can demonstrate an ability to control our own population size, our arguments concerning deficiencies in other nations’ population policies will have limited validity.”<sup>12</sup> Like many population planners before, Milton believed the U.S. should limit its population, if only to gain the moral authority to spread its population policies abroad.

The language of human ecology and biology, so central to Ehrlich’s understanding of man’s environmental impact, was invoked regularly by conference speakers. Wayburn explained that “Man is as perilously dependent upon particular physical requirements as is any other kind of animal.”<sup>13</sup> Club leaders seemed comfortable referring to human beings in strictly biological terms, often generalizing about the “species.” Milton, for instance, warned that “first wilderness and its many forms of life will vanish into oblivion as man’s demands upon the biosphere increase. Then man himself will become an endangered species.”<sup>14</sup> The metaphor of “Spaceship Earth” appeared in several speeches, moreover. Like Milton’s phrase the “End of Infinity,” these metaphors summon Ehrlich’s model of a closed and shrinking ecological system.<sup>15</sup>

Prominent Neo-Malthusian Garrett Hardin gave the final talk of the two-day conference. Seeing wilderness as a place that must be safeguarded from the intrusion

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<sup>12</sup> John P. Milton, "Earth: The End of Infinity," in *Wilderness: The Edge of Knowledge* ed. Maxine E. McCloskey (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1969). 218

<sup>13</sup> Edgar Wayburn, "Introductory Remarks" (paper presented at the *Wilderness: The Edge of Knowledge*, San Francisco, 1970 1969). Xii.

<sup>14</sup> Milton, "Earth: The End of Infinity." 223

<sup>15</sup> Sherwin, "Introduction ". 210

of too many people, Hardin proposes that a system must be put in place to determine which people would be permitted to visit. Dismissing purchase, lines, and lotteries, Hardin advocated for a merit system, that “the criterion for admission to the wilderness is great physical vigor.” His remarks did not address worldwide population growth, but rather applied Neo-Malthusian principles to wilderness management.<sup>16</sup>

The conference did, at several moments, stray from pure Neo-Malthusianism. When Edgar Wayburn listed the world’s environmental problems—the “massive pollution of water, air, soils, and watersheds,” and the “attenuation of space and beauty and quietness”—he did not specify overpopulation as their central cause. John Milton’s lecture at times echoed Barry Commoner, one of Ehrlich’s antagonists, by emphasizing dirty technology’s contribution to pollution. Milton did not, moreover, spurn advancement of clean technology, calling on the United States to spend more money on research.<sup>17</sup> Global inequalities played into Milton’s environmental perspective: “Clearly, those of us living in the rich nations, who are now fat from the resources drawn from abroad, bear great responsibility for the less-developed world’s problems.”<sup>18</sup> Even Ehrlich was careful to underscore consumption rather than population on its own, and avoided statements that might have been construed as racist, responding (as Thomas Robertson notes<sup>19</sup>) to some of his early black critics.

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<sup>16</sup> Garret Hardin, “We Must Earn Again for Ourselves What We Have Inherited: A Lesson in Wilderness Economics,” in *Wilderness: The Edge of Knowledge*, ed. Maxine E. McCloskey (San Francisco Sierra Club Books, 1969). 263

<sup>17</sup> “Discussion,” in *Wilderness: The Edge of Knowledge*, ed. Maxine E. McCloskey (San Francisco: 1969). 225.

<sup>18</sup> Milton, “Earth: The End of Infinity.” 216

<sup>19</sup> Robertson, “The Population Bomb”. 230

### Practical and Philosophical Intersections

Still, the 1969 conference affirmed the Sierra Club's increasing identification with Neo-Malthusian thought. The Club's attraction to Ehrlich's Neo-Malthusianism had its roots in a number of factors. It should not be overlooked that Club leaders, like a good deal of the American public, were convinced by writers such as Ehrlich and Hardin that a devastating catastrophe was fast approaching. Club President Edgar Wayburn voiced anxiety that humans were "endangering what is to us the most important species of all—ourselves."<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Brower had lamented that conservationist organizations such as the Sierra Club had not more quickly seized upon population as "the ultimate threat to mankind." As with most people, Club leaders were quite unsettled at the specter of their own extinction.<sup>21</sup>

Neo-Malthusianism, in addition, mirrored wilderness thinking's philosophical reaction to modernity and technological progress. In 1965, *Not Man Apart* described the devastation of the globe, and to "the mass disasters" that would ensue as a result. "These things are Progress," it observed cynically.<sup>22</sup> Two years later, *The Population Bomb* blamed Christianity for the modern myth of progress, an attitude that "God designed and started the whole businesses for our benefit. He made a world for us to dominate and exploit."<sup>23</sup> This message was inseparable from its environmental consequences, Ehrlich argued. Ehrlich and other Neo-Malthusians, moreover, explicitly rejected technological solutions to environmental problems and to food shortage, condemning those who advocated these responses as "technological

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<sup>20</sup> Wayburn, "Introductory Remarks". Xiii.

<sup>21</sup> Brower, "Forward to the Population Bomb." 13.

<sup>22</sup> Jeffers, *Not Man Apart: Lines from Robinson Jeffers*.

<sup>23</sup> Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*. 170

optimists.”<sup>24</sup> The gospel of economic growth and production certainly distressed them both. As Milton explained at the Wilderness Conference, “Only recently have we come to realize that the growth of our Gross National Product may also be the same as the growth of our Gross National Pollution.”<sup>25</sup>

This aversion to growth appeared in Ehrlich’s metaphor of a sinking boat, which paralleled the Club’s rhetoric of closing frontiers.<sup>26</sup> Each showed a similar frustration with humanity’s historical neglect of its geographical and ecological limits. Echoing Nancy Newhall in *This Is the American Earth, The Population Bomb* had discussed the domination of the American landscape by humanity, describing how “Europeans moved rapidly to exploit the spatial, mineral, and other material wealth of the New World,” Ehrlich wrote.<sup>27</sup> The boundaries of wilderness and the boundaries of the earth’s resources mirrored each other in these frameworks. At the Wilderness Conference, land manager Burton W. Silcock called Alaska “the last frontier,” “the last great opportunity for the nation to make the wiser choices.”<sup>28</sup> Both Ehrlich and Sierra Club leaders were drawn to a nostalgic conception of the past, of fewer humans and more space. The Spaceship Earth analogy, invoked regularly at the conference and adopted by Ehrlich in his later books, would subsume ideas about wilderness depletion as well as resource scarcity.

In the same way that many Americans now saw overpopulation as a one-size-fits-all explanation for poverty and ecological degradation, the Sierra Club seized

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<sup>24</sup> Robertson, "The Population Bomb". 131

<sup>25</sup> Milton, "Earth: The End of Infinity." 217. Robertson and Cronon have both acknowledged the centrality of anti-modernism in the environmental movement generally.

<sup>26</sup> Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*. 81

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 169

<sup>28</sup> Burton W. Silcock, "Alaska, the Last Great Opportunity," in *Wilderness: The Edge of Knowledge*, ed. Maxine E. McCloskey (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1969). 72-3

upon it as the answer to wilderness depletion and other, less familiar environmental concerns of the day. To start, more people meant, quite simply, less wilderness. In the Club's first official resolution on population in 1965, board members affirmed that "the 'population explosion' . . . has caused an increasing scarcity of wilderness and wildlife and has impaired the beauty of whole regions, as well as reducing the standards and the quality of life."<sup>29</sup> In one sense, wilderness and population had an inverse relationship, such that an abundance of people was more likely to use up space and resources. As Hardin explained in his concluding remarks of the conference, "were we to divide up the wilderness among even a small fraction of the total population, there would be no wilderness available to anyone."<sup>30</sup> David Brower saw wilderness protection and population control as intimately entangled. Perhaps man, he wrote, "could limit his numbers. He could limit his heretofore unslackened appetite for wilderness."<sup>31</sup>

Overpopulation represented an assault on non-wilderness environmental fronts as well, especially the widely discussed issue of pollution. Brower commented that, "We have strong intimations [of a population limit], as we watch the sea of smog rise around us."<sup>32</sup> "Population is pollution spelled backwards," he remarked later.<sup>33</sup> Ehrlich's prestigious position at Stanford no doubt encouraged the acceptance of his theories among club leaders, moreover, some of whom had scoffed

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<sup>29</sup> Bender, "Immigration and the Environment: The Story of a Sierra Club Policy Initiative". 40

<sup>30</sup> Hardin, "We Must Earn Again for Ourselves What We Have Inherited: A Lesson in Wilderness Economics." 261

<sup>31</sup> Brower, "Forward to the Population Bomb." 14

<sup>32</sup> David Brower, "Wilderness and Self Interest," in *For Earth's Sake: The Life and Times of David Brower*, ed. David Brower (Layton, Utah: Peregrine Books, 1957). 262

<sup>33</sup> John McPhee, *Encounters with the Archdruid* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 197).42

at Rachel Carson's "unscientific" *Silent Spring*.<sup>34</sup> As noted in the Introduction, the Club felt somewhat marginalized from the movement leading up to Earth Day 1970. The Club could also capitalize on the title of "Dr. Paul Ehrlich"—"a qualified scientist"—as referenced on *The Population Bomb*'s cover and teaser, for scientific credibility in the emergent environmental community.

Importantly, Neo-Malthusianism provided a diagnosis and prescription for a problem that wilderness thinkers had long observed but had had only romantic refrains to offer in return. Chapter 1 noted that "return to wilderness" exhortations of *This Is the American Earth* and *Not Man Apart* offered at best ambiguous proposition, and certainly no coherent political solutions to degradation of the natural world. Jeffers' "Passenger Pigeons," as discussed earlier, found its scientific counterpart in Ehrlich's fears of a "death rate solution." Humans had too long tempted the natural processes on which they too were dependent, *Not Man Apart* and Ehrlich both argued. By seeing overpopulation as the source of environmental and wilderness woes, the Sierra Club found a means of combating the disasters for which traditional preservation had no tangible response. Population control, though politically dicey, was a concrete, tractable solution.

What could preservationists, meanwhile, do for Neo-Malthusianism? Certainly, Club leaders exhibited a desire at the 1969 conference to justify their wilderness project in the face of seemingly graver threats. Oceanographer Ferren MacIntyre complained to conference attendees, "Preservationists are known to be emotional, and their arguments are correspondingly discounted in reasoned

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<sup>34</sup> Cohen, *The History of the Sierra Club, 1892-1970*.

discussion.”<sup>35</sup> In response, therefore, conference speakers commented extensively on the contribution that wilderness could make to “world conservation.” These suggestions ran the gamut from the philosophical to the highly pragmatic. Some argued that wilderness symbolized not just an object for saving, but a barometer of the planet’s health; “Nature, like the coal miner’s canary, is a sensitive indicator of what lies ahead for man. If wilderness cannot survive, neither can we” said MacIntyre.<sup>36</sup>

Geographer George Macinko offered two practical uses for wilderness to “world conservation.” Wilderness functioned as an “ecological landmark,” he suggested, a standard for judging man’s management systems.” When humans strayed too far from ecological balanced, they could turn back to wilderness for a model of harmony. Wilderness could also serve as the source of knowledge and of pharmaceutical potential, Macinko offered, the “natural biota for medicinal purposes and as a gene pool.”<sup>37</sup> Despite the pragmatism of these previous suggestions, Macinko nevertheless revisited the precept of wilderness’s spiritual and spiritual importance. He explained, “Perhaps more important than these scientific values is the potential value of wilderness as a civilizing influence on man in that the qualities of foresight and forbearance, the capacity for wonder and compassion...are also fundamental to the salvation of man.”<sup>38</sup>

In contrast, environmental scientist Robert R. Curry voiced a radically utilitarian justification for wilderness preservation. Curry submitted that one to two

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<sup>35</sup> "Discussion." 251

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 251

<sup>37</sup> George Macinko, "Constructing the Man-Made Wilderness," in *Wilderness: The Edge of Knowledge*, ed. Maxine E. McCloskey (San Francisco Sierra Club Books, 1969). 241

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. 241

“great famines” would occur between 1970 and 2050, and, citing Ehrlich, predicted that these famines would create such desperate, unrest, and geopolitical warfare as to annihilate most forms of life on earth. Wilderness areas, Curry exhorted, could function as a safety zone for whatever and whoever was residing within them. “The world’s intrinsically viable ecosystem preserves, in addition to giving pleasure and knowledge to the present population, will act as the biotic reserves for plants and animals able to repopulate the denuded, soil-free, scorched earth after human, plant, and animal population crashes that accompany famines,” said Curry.<sup>39</sup> Curry’s entreaty for wilderness preservation resembled none of the Sierra Club’s forbearers, eschewing nostalgia and idealization for sheer survival. He appealed on behalf of wilderness, but mainly as a means of preserving the human species and some quality-of-life for those who survive.

Ehrlich, for his part, viewed wilderness protection as at best a worthwhile but nonessential cause, and at worst a distraction from urgent conservation efforts. As mentioned in Chapter 2, he had rejected appeals to “pleasantness, beauty, indeed glory of many natural areas” as a means of stimulating conservation activism.<sup>40</sup> While the success of population control did not depend on the success of wilderness preservation, successful wilderness preservation certainly depended on it. Ehrlich asserted, “Putting aside a park here and there is laudable, but not enough. Unless we attack the worldwide problem, putting aside parks is a waste of time.”<sup>41</sup> The wilderness cause, moreover, would not stimulate the kind of intense movement

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<sup>39</sup> "Discussion." 246

<sup>40</sup> Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Ehrlich, "Population and Conservation: Two Sides of a Coin" (paper presented at the Wilderness: The Edge of Knowledge: 11th Annual Wilderness Conference, San Francisco, 1970 1969). 10



needed to defuse the population bomb because “most Americans clearly don’t give a damn.”<sup>42</sup>

Ehrlich clearly, however, saw preservationists and particularly the Sierra Club as important allies, and could capitalize on wilderness ideology as an established framework. In his address at the Wilderness Conference, Ehrlich expressed the hope that the Sierra would “become much more deeply involved in world conservation”—in other words, use their influence and constituency to focus on overpopulation.<sup>43</sup>

Tellingly, moreover, *The Population Bomb* had borrowed some of the romantic imagery of wilderness-writing. In one passage, Ehrlich echoed biblical allusions from Newhall’s verse, warning readers of “three of the four apocalyptic horsemen—war, pestilence, and famine.”<sup>44</sup> Ehrlich recognized that wilderness thinking’s emotional appeal could help him communicate the extent of ecological danger, the passage suggests. Indeed, preservationists and Neo-Malthusians thought they had struck a powerful blend. Macinko affirmed that the “appeal to the general populace will be largely emotional” but paired with “backing of the scientific community.”<sup>45</sup>

This reliance on preservationist impulses was not, though, merely a calculation to further engage the reader. Ehrlich himself had been moved by the loss of habitats and farmland in Northern California, to which he would later “attribute much of his passion about overpopulation.”<sup>46</sup> Emotion and intuition had influenced his reading of overpopulation, he admitted in *The Population Bomb*’s introduction; during the Ehrlich family’s trip to India, “we were just some overprivileged tourists,

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<sup>42</sup> Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*. 66

<sup>43</sup> Ehrlich, "Population and Conservation: Two Sides of a Coin". 10

<sup>44</sup> Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*. 69.

<sup>45</sup> "Discussion." 254

<sup>46</sup> Robertson, "The Population Bomb". 204

unaccustomed to the sights and sounds of India.” Yet Ehrlich nevertheless affirmed this gut impulse, his disgust for what he saw outside his car: “Perhaps, but since that night I’ve known the feel of overpopulation.”<sup>47</sup> As the next section attests, the Sierra Club could articulate in verse and images what Neo-Malthusians *felt*, but could not express with reasoning and statistics.

Biological Uniformity and *Natural Unnaturalness*: Humanity as Universally  
Destructive

The main contention of this paper is that the Club’s identification with Neo-Malthusianism stemmed from its hostility toward humankind, as imposed by the wilderness ideal. To understand the link between wilderness thinking and Neo-Malthusianism, it is useful to examine the intellectual overlap between their critics. I outlined these arguments in Chapters 1 and 2. William Cronon charged wilderness thinking with drawing a strict dichotomy between humanity and nature, and in turn devaluing man for his corrupting influence on wilderness. Meanwhile, detractors of Neo-Malthusianism like Hans Magnus Enzenberger and Thomas Robertson had rebuked Ehrlich for viewing ecological degradation and human poverty solely through the lens of evolutionary biology.

At first glance, the assessments seem at odds with one another. Where Cronon condemned wilderness thinking’s depiction of humans as “unnatural,” Enzenberger and Robertson criticized Ehrlich for portraying them as *too natural*. Yet what appears to be a disjunction, I argue, in fact represents the most powerful confluence of the two critiques. None of Ehrlich’s dissenters, after all, intended to refute

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<sup>47</sup> Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*.16.

Ehrlich's belief that humans were biological creatures. Likewise, Cronon's essay did not argue that humans *were* and *should be* considered "natural"—but rather, that the construct of nature made an arbitrary, needless distinction.

Both Cronon and Neo-Malthusian dissenters were in fact objecting to what Enzenberger termed "the universalizing" of humanity. Both *The Population Bomb* and mid-century Sierra Club literature, I showed earlier, reduced humanity to a single, undifferentiated unit, whether through biology or through their distinction from "nature." *This Is the American Earth* expressed "man" as a discreet algebraic variable: "In the Mathematics of survival, X equals man."<sup>48</sup> *Not Man Apart*, had similarly likened humanity to fish caught in a closing net, just as Ehrlich had compared them to rats. It was for this reason that the Sierra Club leaders had grown so comfortable discussing humanity as a "species" by the 1969 conference. The term "species" depicted humans as having the same "natural," ontological qualities, characteristics, and destinies.

More important, however, was the specific quality and destiny that humans supposedly shared. Both Neo-Malthusianism and wilderness thinking characterized humans as innately, and chiefly, *destructive*. This mistrust of man's presence on earth has likewise been identified in *This Is the American Earth* and *Not Man Apart*, in Chapter 1. It surfaced again at the Wilderness Conference in 1969, where the "wilderness doctrine of original sin" concluded John Milton's address: "Man was nurtured and is sustained by this planet. Yet, incredibly, this child of the earth now threatens to extinguish both himself and the planetary biosphere that supports him."<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Newhall, *This Is the American Earth*. 36

<sup>49</sup> Milton, "Earth: The End of Infinity." 211

Other speakers confirmed the universal quality of this recklessness, Ferren McIntyre commenting that, “it is entirely possible that a visitor from a truly advanced civilization would see us as we see baboons: aggressive, successful, obnoxious, and poor neighbors.”<sup>50</sup>

Building on Cronon’s critique, I argue that the Sierra Club therefore saw humans as universally bad for the wilderness and for the planet—as “naturally” *unnatural*. It was only logical then that wilderness thinkers would seize upon the multiplication of humanity, expressed by Neo-Malthusianism, as extremely problematic. The mathematics translated quite simply; like Ehrlich explained to conference attendees, “as an organism, every individual man is a part of his environment and has an impact on it. Therefore, the aggregate impact of all men on the world’s environment will always be proportional to the population size.”<sup>51</sup> For the Sierra Club wilderness advocates, more of humanity would mean more destruction; overpopulation connoted more “bad.” Loren Eisley had lamented in 1965, “One is forced to turn and survey the cities on the site of vanished forests, the vast population explosion with its dire implications, the two great decimating wars of our century, and finally, the nature of man himself.” Humanity’s reckless behavior toward nature and its multiplication, which was also reckless, had forced Eisley to look poorly upon man’s ontological disposition, this passage suggests.<sup>52</sup>

These biological and universal depictions of humanity did not differentiate race, class, nationality, level of consumption, or historical inequalities, criticized Robertson and Enzenberger. Neither did *This Is the American Earth*. Alongside the

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<sup>50</sup> "Discussion." 250

<sup>51</sup> Ehrlich, "Population and Conservation: Two Sides of a Coin". 3

<sup>52</sup> Eisley, "Foreword." 24

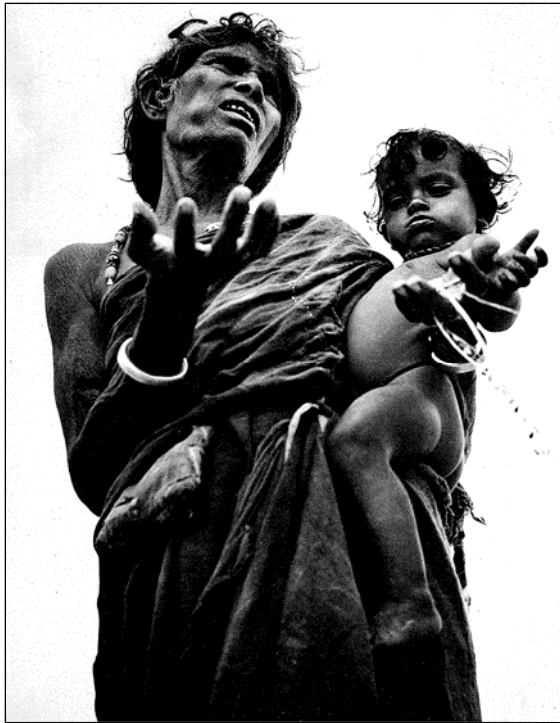
photos of Los Angeles development, its text laments, “Hell we are building here on earth....to blast down the hills, bulldoze the trees, scrape bare the filed/to build predestined slums; until city encroaches on suburb/suburb on country, industry on all, and city joins city.”<sup>53</sup> “We,” it implies, were a devastating force of industrialization. Yet Newhall did not attempt to define this “we” as suburbanites, as Americans, or as members of developed countries. On the contrary, two pages later appears the full-page spread “Bathers on the Ganges.” This photograph of pilgrims gathered on the river Ganges, juxtaposed with the preceding images of Los Angeles housing developments, suggests *all* human societies were “building Hell here on earth.”

Like Ehrlich, the editors of *This Is the American Earth* had turned to India for a model of how overpopulation could lead to poverty, misery, and desolation. “Bathers on the Ganges captured the Delhi crowds that Ehrlich would attempt describe several years later. “People eating, people washing, people sleeping,” Ehrlich wrote. “People visiting, arguing, and screaming”<sup>54</sup> The photo displayed easily a thousand pilgrims engaged in a variety of interactions as they head toward the river. The sands on which they stand seem desolate, furthermore, and the similarity of their dress mirrors the uniformity of the Los Angeles suburbs. Large numbers, the photo suggests, could eradicate beauty and individuality. The photographed labeled “Famine” served a different purpose, meanwhile. This desperate woman and child

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<sup>53</sup> Newhall, *This Is the American Earth*. 36

<sup>54</sup> Ehrlich, *The Population Bomb*. 15



Selected photographs from *This Is the American Earth*.

Top Left: "Famine, India" by Werner Bischoff (page 6)

Top Right, "Boy in Passage, Andalusia" by Henri Caritter-Bresson (page 41)

Bottom: "Bathers on the Ganges" detail, by Ferenc Berko (page 42).



HENRI CARTIER-BRESSON: Boy in Passage, Andalusia



articulated the privation, suffering, and despair that could result from overpopulation. Much like Ehrlich recounted how his visit to India was the first time he “understood overpopulation emotionally,” these photographs gave readers a visual understanding of “too many people.”

Turning the page once more, the text chides humanity for “breed[ing] recklessly, until every day hundreds of thousands, millions more crowd in among our already crowded billions.”<sup>1</sup> This statement is, as usual, quite general. However, its juxtaposition to “Bathers on the Ganges” reminds readers *which* people were “breeding recklessly,” and where. Ehrlich’s “responsible” and “irresponsible” distinction, discussed in Chapter 2, would mirror this indictment. Robertson notes how Ehrlich viewed himself as a member of the “responsibles” due to his single-child family. Wilderness thinkers had had a similar sense of their own ascendancy. Of Robinson Jeffers, Eisley wrote “I felt in his presence almost as if I stood before another and nobler species of man.”<sup>2</sup> Neither the people Ehrlich had observed outside of his car in Delhi, nor the bathers pictured in *This Is the American Earth*, met those qualifications of ecological responsibility.

I contended in Chapter 2 that representations of race, class, and nationality in *The Population Bomb* exploited cultural anxieties to further distance its readers from this “irresponsible” contingent. In *This Is the American Earth*, the Indian woman’s race, class, nationality, as much as her gesture of hunger, indicated her degraded quality-of-life. A second photograph goes even farther in its use of racial markers to reflect poverty, displaying displays a dark, somber young boy standing alone in a

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<sup>1</sup> Newhall, *This Is the American Earth*. 44

<sup>2</sup> Eisley, “Foreword.” 23

passage. Nothing in the photograph “Boy in Andalusia” suggests overpopulation, famine, or environmental peril—*unless* one reads into the boy’s skin color, nationality, urban placement as a marker of poverty. The text below reads, “Cheated, deluded, trapped in city corridors, enmeshed in suburbs, empty of/ heart, mind, hand, they turn their energies to evil.”<sup>3</sup> What the text means by “evil” is unclear. Could this boy’s deprivation make him a threat to America, to the readers’ comfortable lives? The Indian woman’s fearful expression and outstretched hands would indicate so.

Readers of *This Is the American Earth*, in this way, faced the same question as did readers of *The Population Bomb* when Ehrlich recounted tales of overseas poverty. Does the elderly Indian woman deserve succor from America? Or would this charity constitute “lifeboat ethics,” which Neo-Malthusians warned would sink the whole ship?<sup>4</sup> The narration writes its own “scenario” envisioning “two thirds of the population of the world find want and hunger multiplying like themselves.” The blame lay in irresponsible reproduction, this passage reveals.<sup>5</sup> The book alludes also to the dangers of defying nature by decreasing the death rate—“unwittingly Man’s mercy binds these multitudes, helpless/in crueller chains, to face not mortal dragons but avenging angels more terrible than fiends.”<sup>6</sup> When seen in light of Ehrlich’s recommendations several years later, the hungry woman and child symbolize caution, the literal threat to the quality of life for Americans, and the danger of compassion.

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<sup>3</sup> Newhall, *This Is the American Earth*. 41

<sup>4</sup> In 1974, Neo-Malthusian and Ehrlich colleague Garret Hardin published “Lifeboat Ethics: The Case Against Helping the Poor,” in which he argued that international aid to failing counties would end up devastating the entire world population. Garrett Hardin, “Lifeboat Ethics: The Case against Helping the Poor,” *Psychology Today*, no. September (1974).

<sup>5</sup> Newhall, *This Is the American Earth*. 44

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* 46



The tendency of Neo-Malthusianism and wilderness thinking to distance and exclude is perhaps best demonstrated by Garret Hardin's talk on "wilderness economics" at the Wilderness Conference, where he argued that wilderness should be reserved for the physically fit. Too many people would ruin wilderness, he asserted, especially if they required things like paths and rest stops. Hardin recommended: "It is clear that many of our present national parks, forests, and other recreation areas should be forever closed to people on crutches, to small children, to fat people, to people with heart conditions, and to old people in their usual state of physical disrepair."<sup>7</sup> A Neo-Malthusian, Hardin would famously coin the phrase "Life-Boat Ethics" in 1974, when like Ehrlich he advocated an end to international aid. If the U.S. used up its resources on other countries, he said "the boat swamps, everyone drowns." "Complete justice, complete catastrophe," wrote Hardin.<sup>8</sup> His proposition, of course, rearticulated that of Ehrlich to suspend food aid programs, in *The Population Bomb*.

Neo-Malthusianism and the Sierra Club reinforced in one another this troubling nonchalance toward human lives, this paper concludes. Earlier in this chapter, I detailed the Neo-Malthusian influence on Club publications and rhetoric during the 1960s, and the unique narrative voice it created. I presented a number of additional reasons for this partnership, including their critique of progress, belief in limits, and desire for clout in the environmental movement. Yet the critiques outlined in earlier chapters, I contended, provide the best clue for understanding the wilderness thinking/Neo-Malthusianism connection. The shared conception of human as

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<sup>7</sup> Hardin, "We Must Earn Again for Ourselves What We Have Inherited: A Lesson in Wilderness Economics." 265

<sup>8</sup> Hardin, "Lifeboat Ethics: The Case against Helping the Poor."

universally destructive indicted all peoples, while still leaving room for differentiation through race, class, and nationality. My conclusion will discuss the ways in which the antipathy toward universalized humanity still governs the priorities of “mainstream” environmental movement.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The term “mainstream environmental movement” usually refers to the “big ten” environmental organizations, which became increasingly professional as lobbyist organizations during the 1980s. This group includes the Sierra Club, the Wilderness Society, the National Wildlife Federation, and the National Resources Defense Council. See Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring*. 117.

## Conclusion

This paper contends that the Sierra Club's commissioning and publication of *The Population Bomb* was the crowning moment of a profoundly influential marriage between two environmental philosophies. The Club's adoption of a Neo-Malthusian framework was by no means inevitable; its leaders were devotees of a romantic, American wilderness tradition, whereas Ehrlich's book reflected a movement of strictly utilitarian, worldwide-scarcity theoreticians. Neo-Malthusianism, moreover, was certainly not the only innovative environmental framework in town. The Sierra Club could have just as easily embraced Rachel Carson's concern for human health, Barry Commoner's critique of industrial technology, or Murray Bookchin's desire to localize economies. Yet between 1960 and 1969, the Sierra Club's publications and rhetoric demonstrated an increasing willingness to blame environmental ills on overpopulation.

My paper has attempted to illuminate the roots of this attraction. I argued that the conception of human as universally destructive had long presided in the Sierra Club's wilderness ideology, and that it found for the first time a biological and political theory in Neo-Malthusianism. Wilderness thinkers' hostility towards humanity would advance Ehrlich's cause, furthermore, by making his least humanitarian suggestions palatable. Cultural anxieties regarding race, class, and nationality appeared in Sierra Club literature as well as in *The Population Bomb*, in a manner that visualized this distrust. The wilderness ideal and human ecology, as a consequence, buttressed each other to justify political marginalization, wealth disparity, and abandonment at crucial moments.

The blend of Neo-Malthusianism and wilderness thinking would inspire, as a result, indifferent attitudes toward the plight of fellow humans. At the 1969 Wilderness Conference, Ferren MacIntyre remarked sardonically that, “we” could address overpopulation and famine by “taking to heart Swift’s Modest Proposal.” His allusion to Jonathan Swift’s satirical pamphlet, urging needy Irish families to sell their children as food, exposed a jarring lack of concern about the fate of poor communities.<sup>1</sup> As William Cronon explains, “if we set too high a stock on wilderness, too many other corners of the earth become less than natural and *too many other people become less than human*, thereby giving us permission not to care much about their suffering or their fate.”<sup>2</sup>

Cronon felt most critical of the radical environmental wing, which emerged in the 1980s and early 90s. In 1987, the *Utne Reader* printed an article with the headline “Is AIDS Good for the Earth?” Some “radical environmentalists” had said yes: that reducing populations in a “natural” way through mass starvation and epidemics would bring the earth closer to its proper equilibrium. The organization Earth First! had suggested in its journal that “AIDs is the earth’s own response to pollution and overpopulation.”<sup>3</sup>

Earth First’s “radical” proposal was not a stretch for environmental imaginations schooled in wilderness thinking and Neo-Malthusianism. As this paper has argued, wilderness thinkers and Neo-Malthusians believed that fewer people on earth would mean more wilderness and a higher quality of life for those humans who

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<sup>1</sup> "Discussion."250

<sup>2</sup> Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness." 34.

<sup>3</sup> Brad Edmondson, "Is Aids Good for the Earth," *Utne Reader*, no. November/December (1987). See also a follow-up article "The Population Bomb: An Explosive Issue for the Environmental Movement".

remained. AIDS, like famine, was an ecological phenomenon whose victims were unlucky, or were casualties of their own sexual irresponsibility. The fact that AIDS was associated most with Africa and with marginalized queer and Haitian communities within the U.S.—and that in contrast, most radical and mainstream environmentalists were white and middle class—should not be overlooked, either.

Experiences within my own environmentalist community remind me that the perspectives expressed by Paul Ehrlich and Earth First! have by no means disappeared in 2008. Nor are they limited to a few, vocal militants. I recently attended a lecture/discussion on “The Place of Humans in Creation,” with a progressive local minister and a small group of eco-minded students. The talk began with observations on “the ways humans are.” Could humans transcend their “tribalism,” “shortsightedness,” and “greed” to stop global warming and ecological disaster, the group asked? These questions elicited a conversation about humans as an “invasive species,” a disease on the planet. One student suggested that by trying to save the human species from extinction, environmentalists were doing the planet a disservice. “The earth would actually be better off without us,” she remarked.

Not everyone agreed with her proposal to let global climate change run its course; after all, as one person noted, rising temperatures would eradicate animal and plant species as well. No one in this group, however, seemed shocked by her sentiment. I would not have been either a year ago, had I not encountered William Cronon’s mind-blowing argument that humans didn’t necessarily poison whatever they touched.

Cronon understood that the general indictment against humanity leaves us with a slew of problems. If we see humans as a cancer, then we need not trouble ourselves about the loss of human life around the planet. Environmentalists don't need to take a stance against the genocide in Darfur, the war in Iraq, the devastation of poor communities' New Orleans, because these belongs to the realm of social/political, and not "environmental" activism.

In the late 1970s and 80s, the environmental justice (EJ) movement responded to this gap by providing "a home for activists who weren't comfortable separating their concern over the state of the planet from their concerns about social justice."<sup>4</sup> EJ's influence is becoming especially important as fears about global warming increasingly subsume today's wider movement. One of the oddities of climate change is its disproportionate impacts on poor communities who have contributed the least to the problem but have the least capacity to adapt to rising sea levels, extreme weather, changing rain patterns, and other consequences. Like other environmental problems, climate will not impact all of the species in an equal, universal manner, but will reflect and exacerbate historical, economic, and environmental inequalities worldwide.

EJ has suggested that immediately reducing greenhouse gas emissions is not enough. In 2002, the Second People of Color Environmental Justice Leadership adopted the Bali Principles of *Climate Justice*, affirmed the right of "the victims of climate change and associated injustices to receive full compensation, restoration, and

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 8

reparation for loss of land, livelihood and other damages.”<sup>5</sup> Some members of the growing climate action movement have taken up climate justice as a central tenet. The up-and-coming, youth-led Energy Action Coalition has adopted the Bali Principles, for instance. Oxfam International has likewise started a climate change campaign to raise funds for climate adaptation efforts and lobby for increase in U.S. international aid. Humanitarian organizations like Oxfam, this suggests, may be less reluctant to include the environment in its mission than environmentalists are to include humans in theirs.

Mainstream organizations like the Sierra Club and National Resource Defense Council have not remained wholly unaffected by the environmental justice critique, either. The mainstream movement had by and large retreated from the emphasis on overpopulation by the end of the 1980s, in part due to the attacks that Neo-Malthusianism faced from the left and from the right.<sup>6</sup> Environmental groups show an awareness of environmental justice and environmental racism as well. The Sierra Club and NRDC both feature website sections entitled “Environmental Justice” (which is very fashionable), and neither organization dares to mention worldwide overpopulation without stressing overconsumption in developed countries. Yet the Sierra Club still maintains “all of our environmental successes may be short-lived if they do not include efforts to address population growth.”<sup>7</sup> Though certainly more

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<sup>5</sup>“People of Color Environmental Justice "Principles of Working Together" " (2002).[http://energyactioncoalition.org/sites/energyactioncoalition.org/files/EJ\\_principles.pdf](http://energyactioncoalition.org/sites/energyactioncoalition.org/files/EJ_principles.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Roy Beck and Leon Kolankiewicz, "The Environmental Movement's Retreat from Advocating U.S. Population Stabilization (1970-1998): A First Draft of History," *Journal of Policy History* (2000).

<sup>7</sup> See The Sierra Club’s campaign on Global Population and Environment, <http://sierraclub.org/population/overview/>

sophisticated than Ehrlich's simple mathematical calculation, the Sierra Club has not retreated from his logic.

In today's mainstream environmental organizations and media, moreover, omissions speak more loudly than words. Climate change has by and large been presented as a narrative about ice caps melting, major cities being flooded, and Arctic mammals facing extinction. I receive a steady flow of emails from StopGlobalWarming.com about the state of the polar bears and glaciers, but must turn to Oxfam, the *BBC*, *London Times*, or occasionally the *New York Times* to find out about the failure of rice crops due to salinization in Bangladesh, the unprecedented flooding and displacement on the Indian Subcontinent, the equally unmatched desertification in sub-Saharan Africa, and the displacement of entire communities on islands like Tuvalu.<sup>8</sup>

I do not mean to diminish the gravity of the ice caps melting (which has extremely serious repercussions for human communities) or the plight of the polar bears. But I do believe that these "natural" tragedies distract us from the momentous injustice that countries like the United States have committed through our inordinate development and consumption of fossil fuels.

It is possible, moreover, that we will not succeed in addressing ecological problems without contemplating the human institutions which cause them. Mahmood Mamdani pointed out in 1972 that reducing worldwide population will always be a pipe dream until the needs of poor communities are met. Murray Bookchin argued in 1983, furthermore, that "the very notion of the domination of nature by man stems

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<sup>8</sup> This observations came out of a research paper I wrote for the Climate Institute in 2007, for which I was shocked to find that none of the mainstream organizations had any information on environmental refugees on their websites. See <http://climate.org/topics/environmental-security/index.html>



from the very real domination of human by human.”<sup>9</sup> Bookchin, EJ, and many others suggest that by concentrating on human beings as the principle engines of their own destruction, we might miss the underlying *social* causes of poverty and environmental degradation.

The purpose of this paper was to examine the intellectual roots of a strain in environmentalism that I, along with many environmental and social activists, find troubling, limiting, and ultimately counterproductive. Historians have not attempted to analyze what brought together Neo-Malthusians and wilderness thinking in the 1960s, despite the fact that their influence remains so strong in today’s environmental rhetoric.<sup>269</sup> By deconstructing the role of both the wilderness ethic and Neo-Malthusianism as moral frameworks, I believe we can better understand the anti-humanist and hegemonic undertones that must be overcome to get at the root of environmental problems.

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<sup>9</sup> This is quoted from a summary of Bookchin’s book, which I was not able to access, from its publisher’s website, AKpress.org. See Murray Bookchin, *The Ecology of Freedom: The Emergence and Dissolution of Hierarchy* (AK Press, 1982, 2002).

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