

Activists in Australia on the issues of population growth, immigration and the environment were heartened a few months ago by a statement from Bob Carr, premier of New South Wales, advocating a cap on Australia's population — the city of Sydney in New South Wales, is coping with massive immigration. Finally a front-page article in a national newspaper was questioning population growth. The item below is © The Weekend Australian, and appeared in the issue of June 3-4, 1995. It is reprinted with permission.

A City Bursting at the Seams

From *The Weekend Australian*

The premier of New South Wales, Mr. Carr, wants a cap on Australia's population — probably at a level not far from the present 18 million. In an interview with *The Weekend Australian*, he said those who argued that Australia should aim for a population of 30 million or 50 million were "totally scientifically illiterate." To achieve the goal implied by Mr. Carr of stabilizing the population would require maintaining the low immigration levels of recent years or even reducing them.

He said any intelligent person who looked at the evidence had to be persuaded by environmental limits on population. "The debate ought to be about the carrying capacity of the continent — a continent that has lousy soils, fragile vegetation, and depleted and degraded river systems," he said.

He also argued that the most successful economies in the world were those such as Japan, Germany and Switzerland with stable populations.

An inquiry chaired by federal ALP president and former science minister Mr. Barry Jones last year found that a stable population of 23 million could be achieved with net migration of 50,000 a year. Immigration in recent times peaked in 1988-89 with a net figure of 157,400. In 1992-93 net immigration was 30,500 with 49,600

the following year.

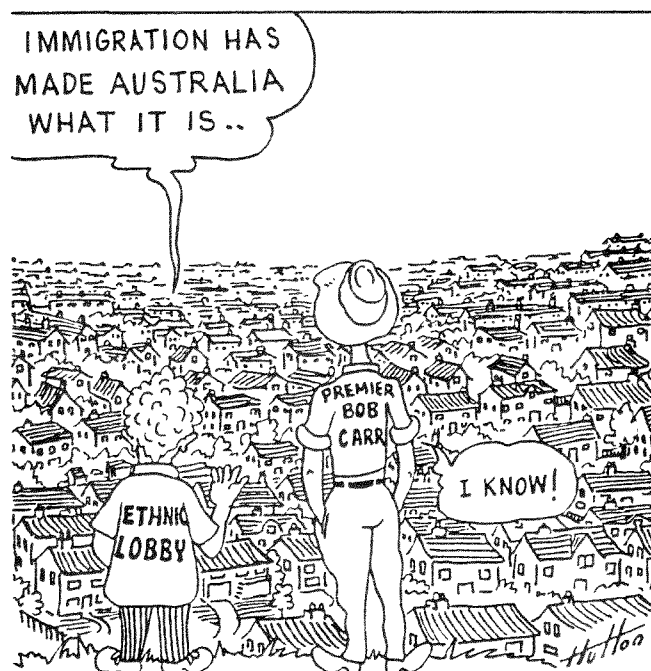
Mr. Carr triggered a debate last week when he argued that immigration should be cut on environmental grounds. He has gone further this week in challenging the post-World War II orthodoxy that immigration and rapid population growth deliver net economic benefits — still the basis of Canberra's immigration policy.

Mr. Carr wants to force Canberra to do what successive federal governments have avoided: set a target for Australia's population. Those who have advocated targets range from environmentalists who say the population should be allowed to fall to 7 million or lower, to economists and some business people who want Australia to have 80 million to 100 million people.

Mr. Carr also has challenged political orthodoxy by offending the ethnic lobby. In the interview he defined his position in the debate as "a supporter of multiculturalism, a fierce

opponent of racial prejudice, yet someone who is aware of the ecological limits Australia is up against."

"I am arguing for a population policy while rejecting any element of discrimination in immigration policy. It is an intelligent mix which people



understand," he said.

I have been encouraged by the response I have had, particularly from people with migrant backgrounds, people who know exactly what I'm talking about. I am happy to become the first Australian leader to say we ought to debate Australia's carrying capacity."

Asked about the attitude of other countries, including our neighbors, that Australia was underpopulated, he said people overseas held this view only "until they fly over and see how much of it is desert."

Asked whether a low population argument was

sustainable in the long run with a still growing world population, Mr. Carr responded: "We have got no alternative. If you focus on the Murray-Darling river system and if your soils are blown across the Tasman when the weather turns bad and if your marginal farm land is collapsing, you just have got no alternative."

Mr. Carr said he did not know what the optimum population level was for Australia but he would be exploring this in a detailed paper he had commissioned from his department. He stressed that this study would go further than his concerns over the population limits of the Sydney basin. ■

Optimum Population

The raging monster upon the land is population growth. In its presence, sustainability is but a fragile theoretical construct. To say, as many do, that the difficulties of nations are not due to people but to poor ideology or land-use management is sophistic. If Bangladesh had 10 million inhabitants instead of 115 million, its impoverished people could live on prosperous farms away from the dangerous floodplains midst a natural and stable upland environment. It is also sophistic to point to the Netherlands and Japan, as many commentators incredibly still do, as models of densely populated but prosperous societies. Both are highly specialized industrial nations dependent upon massive imports of natural resources from the rest of the world. If all nations held the same number of people per square kilometer, they would converge in quality of life to Bangladesh rather than to the Netherlands and Japan, and their irreplaceable natural resources would soon join the seven wonders of the world as scattered vestiges of an ancient history.

Every nation has an economic policy and a foreign policy. The time has come to speak more openly of a population policy. By this I mean not just the capping of growth when the population hits the wall, as in China and India, but a policy based on a rational solution of this problem: what, in the judgment of its informed citizenry, is the optimal population, taken for each country in turn, placed against the backdrop of global demography? The answer will follow from an assessment of the society's self-image, its natural resources, its geography, and the specialized long-term role it can most effectively play in the international community. It can be implemented by encouragement or relaxation of birth control and the regulation of immigration, aimed at a target density and age distribution of the national population. The goal of an optimal population will require addressing, for the first time, the full range of processes that lock together the economy and the environment, the national interest and the global commons, the welfare of the present generation with that of future generations. The matter should be aired not only in think tanks but in public debate. If humanity then chooses to breed itself and the rest of life into impoverishment, at least it will have done so with open eyes.

— From *The Diversity of Life* by E. O. Wilson

Human Boom Gives Animals No Room to Roam

By John Stackhouse

Indraneil Das doesn't have to look very far to see India's wildlife crisis.

From his small office near the Bay of Bengal in southern India, he can watch no fewer than 8,000 crocodiles slither, swim and generally lounge about the pits of his reptile farm.

So fiercely were the crocodiles once hunted that the Indian government hired the Center for Herpetology in Mamallapuram in the 1970s to breed the reptile in captivity.

But now that the animal is thriving, perhaps too much so, no one wants the beast back in the wild.

"The local people no longer want crocodiles," Mr. Das said. "It's understandable. Who wants a crocodile in the local fish pond?"

So Mr. Das and his colleagues watch the reptiles multiply and die. Such struggles for space between humans and wildlife are being played out across India with increasing cause for alarm.

In the land that inspired *The Jungle Book*, the subcontinent's vast, rich and diverse wildlife is under siege as never before by 900 million human beings building highways, hydroelectric dams, plantations, factories — and fish ponds.

Extinction threatens not only the glamorous tiger and elephant, but scores of other species, from the Travancore Evening butterfly to the Andaman wild pig to the Olive Ridley turtle.

Squeezed by human growth and ineffective government conservation measures, more than one-fifth of India's 372 mammal species have entered the official endangered list, with many more insects, reptiles and amphibians to follow.

As India's human population heads toward 1.6 billion in the next century in an area one-third the size of China, the prospects for wildlife seem even more dire. A study published this year by the Zoological Survey of India found that as many as 59 species of freshwater fish — more than 10 percent of the total — face a serious threat of extinction because of irrigation

schemes, dams and deforestation.

While human expansion threatens much of India's wildlife, inept wildlife management appears equally to blame. In India's lush northeast, a recent investigation by the Worldwide Fund for Nature discovered that the Lakhowa wildlife sanctuary had "vanished" because local forestry officials had sold the land to Bangladeshi immigrants. The sanctuary's 70 rhinos appear to have been poached.

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In the Manas sanctuary, also in northeastern India, WWF-India reported massive clear-cutting of forests by a criminal organization and an "alarming rate" of rhinoceros poaching.

Another wildlife sanctuary in northeastern Assam has become home to a military firing range. A study by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature estimated that 8,750 acres of elephant habitat in northeastern India have been lost to military bases.

And the well-protected elephant is running out of space. With about 20,000 pachyderms remaining in the subcontinent, the land squeeze has reached such critical levels that when 50 left a forest in northeastern India last year in search of food, the herd came within a day's march of Calcutta. In their march, the elephants trampled to death six persons and destroyed a wide swath of farmland. ■