

THE 800-POUND GORILLA IN THE ROOM

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My good friend Richard Grossman has written a rousing editorial essay in the Durango Herald (Durango Herald, Oct. 25th, 2009), an admirable piece of righteous thinking. Still, at the risk of sounding ungracious, I would like to invite us all to inspect this 800-pound gorilla lurking in our midst, the one that everybody is so busy pretending isn't there. Indeed, I would like us to inspect two such gorillas. For however real global warming may be, and however urgent it is that we do something about it, focusing on carbon footprints, cap-and-trade, alternative fuels and energy-efficiency is but a distraction, deflecting us from facing the real issue--those twin 800-pound gorillas.

Behold our first gorilla--the population bomb. Till ca. 10,000 years ago, we behaved like other natural species. We climbed slowly up the food chain to become the top predator, while remaining attuned to the feast-and-famine rhythm of nature. Our population size fluctuated wildly, ca. 70,000 BC we almost went extinct. After which we began our current expansion. By 40,000 BC we were in Australia; by 30,000 BC in Alaska; by 13,000 BC in Tierra del Fuego. By 10,000 BC, we exhausted the hunting-and-gathering carrying capacity of the planet, having become victims of our success. Then, ca. 8,000 BC, we got a reprieve--animal domestication, plant breeding and sedentary agriculture. An explosive rise in our population density soon followed, together with an unprecedented increase in the size of our social units, then the inevitable rise of coercive governance. We built cities and states and empires. We engaged in warfare on a hitherto unprecedented scale.

But irrigated agriculture soon begat de-forestation, over-grazing and soil erosion. Our larger social units proved to be colossal energy drains. Wood burning powered our nascent industries. We built temples, monuments and castles. The changes often ascribed to the industrial revolution did not start in the 18th Century, they were inherent in the agrarian revolution. And it was our energy-intensive lifestyle, coupled with modern medicine, that has brought us to our current predicament. Ca. 10,000 BC we outstripped the hunting-and-gathering carrying capacity of our habitat; ca. 1,800 AD we outstripped its pre-industrial capacity; by 2,000 AD we exhausted its industrial-age capacity. Still, we keep breeding and curing.

If you are looking for culprits, here are some: Poverty and illiteracy. Couple with modern medicine, they make an explosive brew. But poverty and illiteracy are egged on to fruit and multiply by fundamentalist preachers of all stripes--Catholic and Protestant, Moslem and Jew, Hindu and Mormon. So yes, we have met the enemy, and it is us. Here is what all fundamentalists hold sacred--the subjugation of women, keeping them ignorant, confined, compliant breeders. A chimp or a gorilla female breeds every 5 years. Our women have been giving birth every 2 years ever since *Homo erectus*. Before the advent of modern medicine, 10 births over a woman's lifetime produced 2 surviving heirs. The logic of constant breeding was the natural logic of infant mortality and parental investment: You invest little in each child but produce many, of whom only a few make it to maturity. The hallmark of the educated modern family is just the reverse: You invest much in each child but bear fewer children, who all survive.

There is the simple calculus to effective population control--liberated, educated women in charge of their own reproductive destiny. This is the key to slowing down our rampant over-breeding, and it is much cheaper than cap-and-trade, carbon consciousness and fancy-green

technological panaceas. Technology is highly energy-consuming . Calories are measured in dollars. If it costs more, it burns more. When solar, wind and bio-diesel cannot compete with oil and gas, green energy consumes more than it produces. High tech is dirty tech. It is just that the dirt is tucked away somewhere else.

Behold our second gorilla--the American Dream. Ever wondered why China, the most successful country in curbing population growth, has just overtaken us as the most carbon-burning nation on earth? Here's why--all those 1-billion Chinese want, desperately, to achieve **our** energy-intensive lifestyle. And the 1-billion Indians are right behind them, as are the Brazilians, the Mexicans, the Africans and Indonesians. We can go on preaching to them conservation, carbon consciousness and greenery till we are blue in the face. But our preaching will ring hollow as long as two of us occupy 3,000 square ft. \$400,000 homes, eat expensive super-healthy food, enjoy air-born trips abroad, drive trendy economy cars and divert ourselves with the latest high-tech gadgets. For as long as this is how we live, we have forfeited the right to preach conservation and greenery to the teeming multitude who are dying to be just like us.

There is a scary book by **Jared Diamond**, "Collapse". It documents how *Homo sapiens*, the only species on earth capable of long-term planning, has opted for the old evolutionary style of population control--periodic catastrophic de-population through famine, war and pestilence. It is a sad story, read it and weep. There is a sweet book by **Sarah Hrdy**, "Mothers and Others". It traces the evolution of our unique mode of child-rearing--cooperative child-care. This inspired invention, by *Homo erectus* ca. 1.8 million ago, made it possible for our women to roam free and contribute as near-equals, to match their men's hunting with their own gathering, to match animal herding with plant cultivation. It is a beautiful ecological account. Read it and smile.

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