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Efficacy of Natural Law in Limiting Human Population Growth

by Les U. Knight

In the discussion about whether or not we should allow "Natural Law" to control human population growth (Nollman 1992, and others), an important consideration is being ignored: Do major die-offs of *Homo sapiens* in fact keep our numbers from increasing?

Malthus and common sense tell us that war, epidemics, famine, and natural disasters will keep the human family from getting too big... but do they really? Empirical evidence doesn't support conventional wisdom.

The Population Reference Bureau's often-reproduced graph of human-population-size-through-time shows only one dip in our inexorable increase: The Plague. Immediately after this minor blip, our numbers began to shoot for the Moon.

The Industrial Revolution was no doubt a factor in allowing us to burgeon to the bursting point, but the Black Death may be the reason we *want* to breed like bunnies. Burned into our collective memory was the horror of massive deaths of our kind. Our reaction as a species, naturally, has been fertility with a vengeance. This programming could be blinding us to the obvious fact that we are enough already.

PEOPLE AS STATISTICS

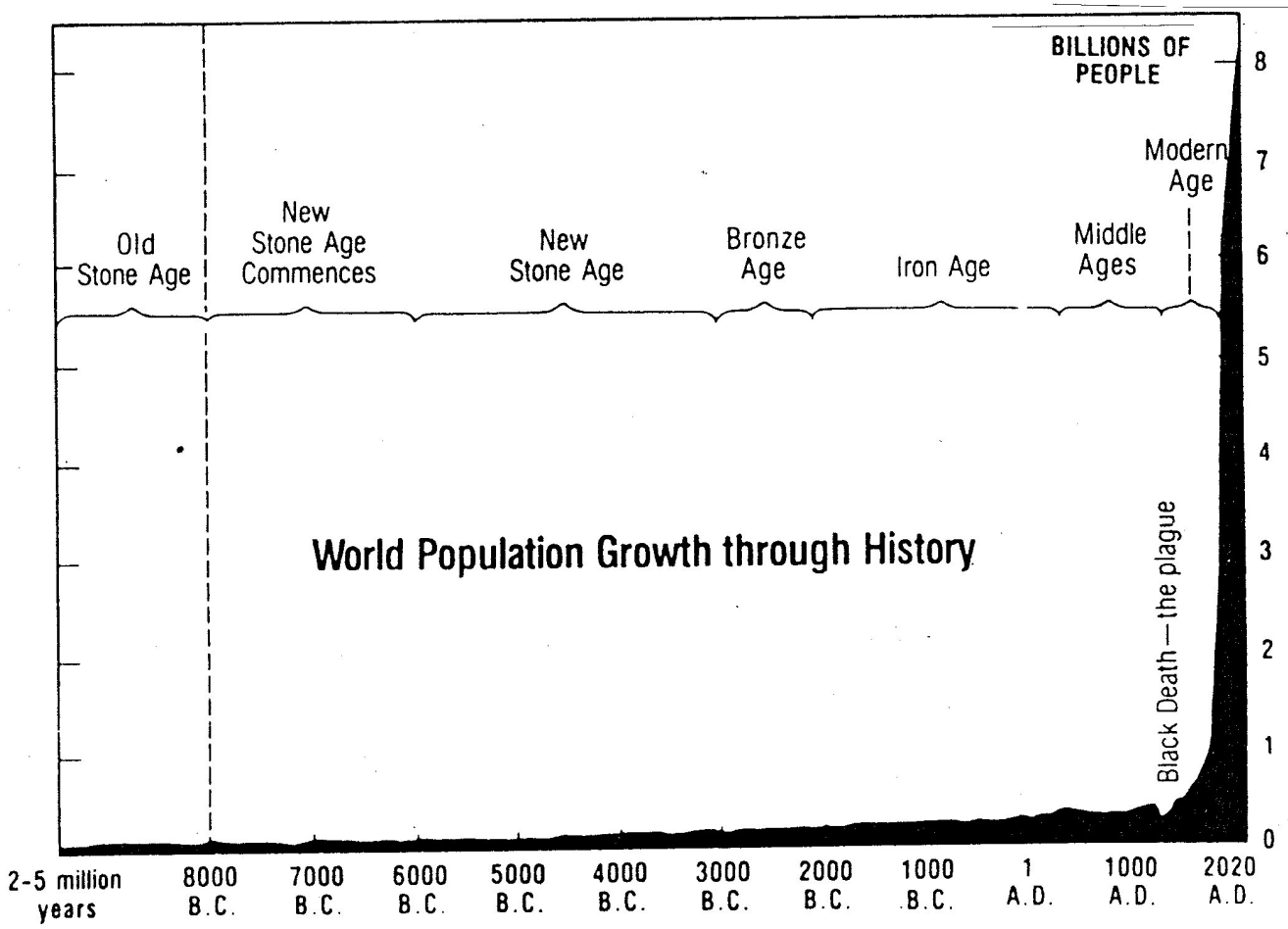
As we study the world's population problem and seek solutions, it's tempting to become detached and look at people as mere numbers in demographic equations, especially when they're halfway around the world. We should bear in mind that each one of those numbers is a member of our family, entitled to the same inalienable human rights that we value for ourselves and our loved ones.

But, for the sake of discussion, let's go ahead and ignore for a moment that inhuman conditions in Third World countries are due in part to the Industrial World's exploitation of their resources and labor. Forget the continued destabilization of their economies and governments. Down the memory hole with decades of well-meaning missionaries' death-control-without-birth-control. Disregard the incumbent interest on debts to rich countries which require cash crops and liquidation of forests. Oh, and nevermind about the moral obligation to help our brothers and sisters in need. Let's just be coldly pragmatic and accept the fact that death has not held our numbers in check... yet.

DEATH ALONE WON'T LOWER POPULATION

Today, our population growth is so rampant that a million lives lost for any cause are replaced in about four days. Withholding aid to starving children, flood victims, or war refugees will do nothing to improve the density of our population as long as we continue to replicate like cancer cells (Hern 1990).

Each day, 386,964 new people are created, and 137,540 of us die (Population Reference Bureau 1992). In order for death alone to reduce our numbers, three times as many people would have to be dying as are now.



HIGH MORTALITY CAUSES HIGH FERTILITY

As paradoxical as it may seem, a *lower* death rate will bring our numbers more in line with the carrying capacity of Earth's biosphere. For example, where child mortality rates are high, couples commonly over-compensate by producing six or seven offspring in hopes that two or three will survive. A lower death rate will bring about a lower birth rate, and a lower birth rate will cause death rates to fall. Nearly one-third of today's mortalities are children who might not have been born if their mothers and fathers had a choice.

REPRODUCTIVE FREEDOM

It has been estimated that at least half of the world's births are unwanted (Knight 1992). If reproductive freedom were universal, this deplorable situation would be inconceivable. A large percentage of the remaining half of today's births are wanted mainly for economic or superstitious reasons, such as free labor or carrying on the family name. Reproductive freedom, economic opportunity, and education are far more effective methods of improving the ratio of people-to-wildlife than promoting death could ever be.

AFTERWARD

When there are fewer people on Earth, conditions for all of Nature's living beings will begin to improve. We can best achieve this by reducing death rates, while at the same time supporting reproductive rights. When everyone has freedom of choice in procreation, and the heightened awareness to not do so, the size of our human family will slowly improve thanks to deaths from a truly natural cause: old age. May we live long and die out.

Les U. Knight (POB 86646 Portland, OR 97286-0646), is the editor of These EXIT Times, *the voice of the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT).*

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Population Reference Bureau, Inc., mid-1992 computation.