

CLIMATE TALK

The Elephant that is Stalking Us

Phil Freeman

Washburn

The Citizens' Climate Lobby is working to build political support for action to decrease U.S. greenhouse gas emissions. The increasing atmospheric concentration of these gases, mainly of carbon dioxide and methane, are causing Earth's climate to warm and change. The ultimate cause of not only climate change but of nearly all of our environmental and some of our social problems, however, is an addiction problem. No, I am not about to blame global warming on meth or opioids – I am talking about our addiction to growth.



Somehow we as a society have developed a delusion that infinite growth on a finite planet is possible and desirable. The most common expression of this belief focuses on "economic growth". Politicians of both major parties as well as nearly all of the minor ones tout economic growth as a solution to various problems. The budget deficit is growing? – Just expand the economy so more taxes will be collected. Schools need more funding? – Encourage people to move into the area to collect more property taxes and increase State aid. The Social Security System is teetering? - Increase immigration to bring in more young workers to pay into the system.

We all want prosperity for ourselves and our neighbors, so what is wrong with this? It is short-sighted thinking. It does not incorporate asking the "...and then what?" questions that are so important when considering long-term effects. And it is selfish thinking, taking the easy way out for now and letting our children and grandchildren suffer the consequences. Economic growth involves creating and selling products and services to more people. Almost all products and most services in one or more ways involve extracting materials from the Earth and using energy to process them and to distribute them. On a finite planet perpetual growth in such an endeavor is not possible. In the meantime, our efforts to chase growth for as long as possible have consequences – consequences like climate change. And the longer we delay facing this reality the more difficult the circumstances will be for the generation that is forced to deal with it.

Astute readers may have noticed that I mentioned a subject that has become almost taboo – population, the “elephant in the room” when we discuss the state of the environment. Both economic growth and environmental impacts are products of population multiplied by per-capita consumption. It seems that this simple fact would be intuitively obvious to most of us, but somehow many of us have become blind to it.

It has not always been that way. During the 1970s mainstream environmental organizations recognized and discussed the connection between population and environmental impacts. Both Presidents Nixon and Carter took it seriously and government reports were issued that included policy recommendations that would have resulted in our putting the brakes on population growth in the U.S. It is true that little was actually done about it, but at least it was on the minds of many people. Today environmental groups are timid about mentioning population and its impacts, and in many circles one may be accused of being racist or worse for pressing the issue. It is time we get over that. Reality is what it is and no amount of wishful thinking will make that go away.

What can we do to reduce and then reverse population growth? I don’t claim to have the knowledge to chart a course for that in any detail, but maybe a general discussion of it can be a subject for a future column. In the meantime, the simple answer is that global population growth occurs any time the birth rate exceeds the death rate. That also holds true for an individual nation but with the added factor of net immigration. I know the politics of dealing with those two factors are much more complicated than the factors themselves. But we must think about it and discuss it and then act. Otherwise, we will suffer the consequences. In fact, those consequences are all around us.

Phil Freeman is a semi-retired forester who lives in the Town of Washburn. When he was born, the population of the U.S. was about 158 million people. Last year it was estimated to be about 324 million.