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Sustainable Population Australia -- Newsletter

Is SPA achieving its aims?

By Jenny Goldie

This title was prompted by a recent question from a SPA member, who wondered whether the considerable money he had donated over the years had been cost effective.

It led to my reflecting on whether SPA had indeed made any progress over the past 29 years since the organisation was founded.

Let's go back to 1988. The population of Australia was 16.6 million and growing by 1.6%. It is now 24.6 million and growing at 1.5%. Although the growth rate now is slightly less, the base is nearly 50% bigger and so the actual number of people added to the population annually is more than in 1988.

Meanwhile, global population grew from 5.1 billion to 7.5 billion – another 2.4 billion people.

Cognisant of the manifold existential threats bearing down on us, not least climate change, I look at these figures and occasionally get depressed.

Nationally, 48% growth in 29 years is even worse than the global increase of 32%. Had we grown at the global rate of 'only' 32%, our population would have been around about 2.5 million less than we actually have.

It is instructive to compare us to the Netherlands. In 1988 it had a population of 14.8 million and is now just over 17 million – in other words, it grew by 2 million or so while we grew by 8 million. Was this a problem for the Netherlands? Well, no. In the 2017 World Happiness rankings, the Netherlands had risen to sixth while Australia had slipped to ninth.

Against this background of inexorably rising national and global population, to what extent have we in SPA managed to influence public debate on the issue? I may be wrong, but personally I think we have, if not by nearly enough.

First, let us consider that we have survived, if not flourished, as we had once hoped. This is no mean feat – it requires a fairly sophisticated level of commitment and expertise to keep going for decades. A similar organisation set up not long after us by Prof Stephen Boyden, initially called Nature and Society Forum (now the Frank Fenner Foundation), is now foundering because of lack of funds. On an individual level, one close friend of SPA, Dr Doug Cocks, wrote five books on population and resources and organised Barney Foran and Franzy Poldi to write the CSIRO report 'Future Dilemmas'. Doug died last year disillusioned and disappointed that he had not been able to achieve more on the issue. So let us try and avoid that fate.

Second, we are respected. The Australian Academy of Science deemed us worthy enough to allow us to run the 2013 conference on population, resources and climate change. CSIRO Publishing deemed us credible enough to publish the book *Sustainable Futures*, arising out of that conference, as well as an earlier book, *In Search of Sustainability*, which arose out of the 2003 conference we helped run of the same name.

We are respected in a way that Pauline Hanson's One Nation party is not. It has one excellent policy, namely zero net migration, but it clouds the issue by bringing in a xenophobic element – wanting to ban Muslim immigration being the latest manifestation. Moreover, One Nation could be fairly described as anti-science, particularly on climate change.

Third, we provide support for a few journalists who are really doing the hard yards for us. Crispin Hull has been writing well on population in the Fairfax media, especially the *Canberra Times*, for years. More recently, Leith van Onselen has been enormously prolific on his MacroBusiness

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website, pushing out articles on an almost daily business in support of our cause.

Just this week, van Onselen railed against The Greens' policy on immigration. He said for 20 years it failed to protest as annual permanent immigration soared from 80,000 to 200,000 today, driving the huge acceleration in Australia's population growth. This has put a massive strain on the nation's environment, which is meant to be The Greens' core concern. He noted that the recently released 2016 *State of the Environment* Report stated that population growth and economic growth were the two main drivers of environmental decline. And it wasn't just environment, but population growth was also affecting living standards in the big cities – such as packed trains, worsening traffic congestion, and deteriorating housing affordability.

Also, van Onselen pointed out that The Greens' new immigration policy that seeks to increase the humanitarian component, without a concomitant decrease in skilled migration, would mean Australia would have 43 million people by 2060, 2 million more than if the current 200,000 permanent immigration level is maintained.

He also highlighted an article in the *Australian Financial Review* by William Bourke, leader of the political party Sustainable Australia, who wrote that our record permanent immigration program of around 200,000 is diluting our skills base. Although the so-called 'skilled' category is two-thirds of the annual program, the government hides the unskilled families of the skilled migrant inside that category. So only around 50,000 (25%) are bringing in designated skills and, worse still, many of those skilled migrants are not even working in their area of expertise.

And now it is not just journalists who are coming out on our side. Take the issue of housing affordability, for instance. As you are all too aware, there is a housing bubble, in Sydney and Melbourne in particular, with demand hugely exceeding supply. Neither leader of the two main parties will address the demand side, namely, an extra 100,000 people in Melbourne every year and 80,000 or so in Sydney. But now there is a growing understanding we need to halve immigration for the sake of housing affordability: we are hearing this from Judith Sloan, Tony Abbott, Mark Latham and, just this week, former NSW Treasury secretary Percy Allan. Some of these people make uncomfortable bedfellows (for me anyway) but, if they are getting the message across, good on them.

And then there's been Gareth Aird, the Commonwealth Bank's senior economist, who in October last year said that while it is undoubtedly true that Australia is comfortably ahead of most of the advanced economies in the most commonly used statistic, GDP, it has not been doing so well on more meaningful measures. His bank's economics team released a report at that time questioning the overwhelming focus on the headline GDP number. It expressed concern that there was relative ignorance around other indicators that better reflect how households are doing. He said on ABC's *RN Breakfast* that the fundamental problem with the GDP figure is that it ignores population growth, which automatically "grows the economy but not the standard of living". A better measure, he said, was real net national disposable income per capita. Aird said that while population growth had been good in the past, without commensurate spending on public infrastructure, the benefits had started to wane.

SPA will never win the day until the dominant paradigm of unending economic growth is no longer the dominant paradigm. Yet people are finally starting to question whether population growth is worth it if their children can't afford to buy real estate; when commuting times exceed an hour each way; when schools are impossibly crowded; when waiting times are excessively long.

Has SPA been a significant player in this new community discussion? Well, not overtly, not as Dick Smith has been. We do need to raise our profile. Nevertheless, by persisting, and by informing our members, we give them the information to speak up in whatever forum is their choice – be it letters to the editor pages in the mainstream press, on talkback radio, in the pub, or the comment section of online media such as *The Conversation*.

Some of you may have seen the documentary *The Age of Consequences* on *Four Corners* about four weeks ago. While primarily about climate change as a threat multiplier, it nevertheless kept coming back to the graphic of the various interconnecting stressors including population growth. Interestingly, one of the people who best understands the gravity of all these interconnected problems, not least population growth, is retired Admiral Chris Barrie who was once head of our defence forces.

It might just be that SPA will have to cooperate more with the military, if indeed it is they who understand the issue best of all.

Has SPA made progress? Yes we have. Not enough, but things are moving. Unfortunately, however, we still have a long road ahead. There is much work still to be done.

Jennie Goldie is a life member of SPA. The above is an edited version of her speech given at the recent SPA AGM.

Opinion

The decoupling delusion: rethinking growth and sustainability

By James Ward, Keri Chiveralls, Lorenzo Fioramonti, Paul Sutton, and Robert Costanza

Our economy and society ultimately depend on natural resources: land, water, material (such as metals) and energy. But some scientists have recognised that there are hard limits to the amount of these resources we can use. It is our consumption of these resources that is behind environmental problems such as extinction, pollution and climate change. Even supposedly 'green' technologies such as renewable energy require materials, land and solar exposure, and cannot grow indefinitely on this (or any) planet.

Most economic policy around the world is driven by the goal of maximising economic growth (or increase in gross domestic product – GDP). Economic growth usually means using more resources. So if we can't keep using more and more resources, what does this mean for growth?

Most conventional economists and policymakers now endorse the idea that growth can be "decoupled" from environmental impacts – that the economy can grow, without using more resources and exacerbating environmental problems.

Even the then US president, Barack Obama, in a recent piece in Science, argued that the US economy could continue growing without increasing carbon emissions thanks to the rollout of renewable energy.

But there are many problems with this idea. In a recent conference of the Australia-New Zealand Society for Ecological Economics (ANZSEE), we looked at why decoupling may be a delusion.

The decoupling delusion

Given that there are hard limits to the amount of resources we can use, genuine decoupling would be the only thing that could allow GDP to grow indefinitely.

Drawing on evidence from the 600-page Economic Report to the President, Obama referred to trends during the course of his presidency showing that the economy grew by more than 10% despite a 9.5% fall in carbon dioxide emissions from the energy sector. In his words:

...this "decoupling" of energy sector emissions and economic growth should put to rest the argument that combating climate change requires accepting lower growth or a lower standard of living.

Others have pointed out similar trends, including the International Energy Agency which last year – albeit on the basis of just two years of data – argued that global carbon emissions have decoupled from economic growth.

But we would argue that what people are observing (and labelling) as decoupling is only partly due to genuine efficiency gains. The rest is a combination of three illusory effects: substitution, financialisation and cost-shifting.

Substituting the problem

Here's an example of substitution of energy resources. In the past, the world evidently decoupled GDP growth from buildup of horse manure in city streets, by substituting other forms of transport for horses. We've also decoupled our economy from whale oil, by substituting it with fossil fuels. And we can substitute fossil fuels with renewable energy.

These changes result in "partial" decoupling – that is, decoupling from specific environmental impacts (manure, whales, carbon emissions). But substituting carbon-intensive energy with cleaner, or even carbon-neutral, energy does not free our economies of their dependence on finite resources.

Let's get something straight: Obama's efforts to support clean energy are commendable. We can – and must – envisage a future powered by 100% renewable energy, which may help break the link between economic activity and climate change. This is especially important now that President Donald Trump threatens to undo even some of these partial successes.

But if you think we have limitless solar energy to fuel limitless clean, green growth, think again. For GDP to keep growing we would need ever-increasing numbers of wind turbines, solar farms, geothermal wells, bioenergy plantations and so on – all requiring ever-increasing amounts of material and land.

Nor is efficiency (getting more economic activity out of each unit of energy and materials) the answer to endless growth. As some of us pointed out in a recent paper, efficiency gains could prolong economic growth and may even look like decoupling (for a while), but we will inevitably reach limits.

Moving money

The economy can also appear to grow without using more resources, through growth in financial activities such as currency trading, credit default swaps and mortgage-backed securities. Such activities don't consume much in the way of resources, but make up an increasing fraction of GDP.

So if GDP is growing, but this growth is increasingly driven by a ballooning finance sector, that would give the appearance of decoupling.

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Meanwhile most people aren't actually getting any more bang for their buck, as most of the wealth remains in the hands of the few. It's ephemeral growth at best: ready to burst at the next crisis.

Shifting the cost onto poorer nations

The third way to create the illusion of decoupling is to move resource-intensive modes of production away from the point of consumption. For instance, many goods consumed in Western nations are made in developing nations.

Consuming those goods boosts GDP in the consuming country, but the environmental impact takes place elsewhere (often in a developing economy where it may not even be measured).

In their 2012 paper, Thomas Wiedmann and co-authors comprehensively analysed domestic and imported materials for 186 countries. They showed that rich nations have appeared to decouple their GDP from domestic raw material consumption, but as soon as imported materials are included they observe "no improvements in resource productivity at all". None at all.

From treating symptoms to finding a cure

One reason why decoupling GDP and its growth from environmental degradation may be harder than conventionally thought is that this development model (growth of GDP) associates value with systematic exploitation of natural systems and also society. As an example, felling and selling old-growth forests increases GDP far more than protecting or replanting them.

Defensive consumption – that is, buying goods and services (such as bottled water, security fences, or private insurance) to protect oneself against environmental degradation and social conflict – is also a crucial contributor to GDP.

Rather than fighting and exploiting the environment, we need to recognise alternative measures of progress. In reality, there is no conflict between human progress and environmental sustainability; wellbeing is directly and positively connected with a healthy environment.

Many other factors that are not captured by GDP affect wellbeing. These include the distribution of wealth and income, the health of the global and regional ecosystems (including the climate), the quality of trust and social interactions at multiple scales, the value of parenting, household work and volunteer work. We therefore need to measure human progress by indicators other than just GDP and its growth rate.

The decoupling delusion simply props up GDP growth as an outdated measure of wellbeing. Instead, we need to recouple the goals of human progress and a healthy environment for a sustainable future.

The decoupling delusion simply props up GDP growth as an outdated measure of wellbeing. Instead, we need to recouple the goals of human progress and a healthy environment for a sustainable future.

This article appeared on The Conversation on 13 March 2017. Dr James Ward is SPA's national president.

Opinion

The human ecological predicament: wages of self-delusion

By William E. Rees

Techno-industrial society is in dangerous ecological overshoot – the human ecological footprint is at least 60% larger than the planet can support sustainably (Wackernagel et al. 2002; Rees 2013; WWF 2016). The global economy is using even renewable and replenishable resources faster than ecosystems can regenerate and filling waste sinks beyond nature's capacity to assimilate (Steffen et al. 2007; Rockström et al. 2009; Barnosky et al. 2012). (Even climate change is a waste management problem – carbon dioxide is the single greatest waste by weight of industrial economies.) Despite the accumulating evidence of impending crisis, the world community seems incapable of responding effectively. This situation is clearly unsustainable and, if present trends continue, will likely lead in this century to runaway climate change, the collapse of major biophysical systems, global strife and therefore diminished prospects for continued civilised existence (Tainter 1987; Diamond 2005; Turner 2014; Motesharrei et al. 2014).

The proximate drivers are excess economic production/consumption and over-population – human impact on the ecosphere is a product of population multiplied by average per capita consumption – exacerbated by an increasingly global compound myth of perpetual economic growth propelled by continuous technological progress (Victor 2008; Rees 2013). While there is evidence of some 'decoupling' of economic production from nature, this is often an artefact of faulty accounting and trade (e.g.,

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wealthy countries are 'off-shoring' their ecological impacts onto poorer countries). Overall, economic throughput (energy and material consumption and waste production) is increasing with population and GDP growth (Wiedmann et al 2013; Giljum et al. 2014). Consequently, carbon dioxide is accumulating at an accelerating rate in the atmosphere (NOAA 2017) and the years 2014, 2015 and 2016 sequentially shared the distinction of being the warmest years in the instrumental record (Hansen et al. 2017).

There is widespread general support for the notion of 'clean production and consumption' but in present circumstances, this must soon translate into less production and consumption by fewer people (Rees 2014).[1] At the same time, this is a world of chronic gross social inequity which greatly erodes population health and social cohesion (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010). According to Oxfam (2017), the world's richest eight billionaires possess the same wealth as the poorest 50% of the human family. More generally, the richest quintile of humanity takes home about 70% of global income compared to just 2% by the poorest fifth of the population (Ortiz and Cummins 2011).

Higher incomes enable the citizens of high income countries to consume, on average, several times their equitable share of global biocapacity while denizens of poor countries are unable to claim a fair allocation of Earth's bounty (WWF 2016). This situation is egregiously unjust, socially destabilizing and ecologically precarious.

The major social implications of these realities should be self-evident. In a rational world, the global community (e.g., the United Nations, the World Bank/IMF) would cease promoting material growth as the primary solution to both north-south inequity and chronic poverty within nations. On a finite planet already in overshoot it is not biophysically possible to raise the material standards of the poor to those of the rich sustainably—i.e., without destroying the ecosphere, undermining life-support functions and precipitating the collapse of global society.[2] In particular, it is irresponsible for the governments of high-income countries to treat economic growth as the panacea for all that ails them.

The evidence argues instead that the world community should cooperate on redistribution, on devising methods to share the benefits of development more equitably. (Unsustainability is a collective problem that requires collective solutions.) The goal should be to enhance the material well-being of developing countries and the poor while simultaneously reducing both aggregate material throughput and world population. Ensuring an economically secure and ecologically stable environment for all requires: a) that rich nations consume less to free up the ecological space needed for justifiable consumption increases in poorer countries (BCSD 1993; Moore and Rees 2013) and; b) that the world implement a universal population management plan designed to reduce the total human population to a level that that can be supported indefinitely at a more-than-satisfactory average material standard. This is what it means to 'live sustainably within the means of nature' (Rees 2014).

Fortunately, planned degrowth (Kerschner 2010; Gheorghică 2012) toward a quasi steady-state economy (Daly 1991, 2008) is technically possible (von Weizsäcker et al. 2009), would benefit the poor and could be achieved while improving overall quality of life even in high-income countries (Victor 2008). Considering the human suffering that would be avoided and number of non-human species that would be preserved[3], it is also a morally compelling strategy.

Obviously, the foregoing diagnosis is anathema to the prevailing growth ethic, the belief that well-being is a linear function of income, and political correctness pertaining to population policy. Many will therefore object on grounds that the foregoing prescription is politically unfeasible and can never be implemented.

They may well be correct. The problem is that what is politically feasible is often ecologically irrelevant. Effective sustainability policy must be consistent with available scientific evidence; 'alternative facts' are mere self-delusion. Failure to implement a global sustainability plan that addresses excess consumption and over-population while ensuring greater social equity may well be fatal to the human prospect. Indeed, adherence to any variant of the status quo promises a future of uncontrollable climate change, plummeting biodiversity, civil disorder, geopo-

[1] It complicates matters that modern society remains highly dependent on abundant cheap energy still mostly supplied by carbon-based fuels. Despite rapid technological advances and falling costs, it is still not clear that renewable energy alternatives, including wind and photovoltaic electricity, can replace fossil fuels in such major uses as transportation and space/water heating in the foreseeable future. Nevertheless, in the absence of effective carbon secquestration technologies, reducing fossil fuel use remains essential to avoiding catastrophic climate change. Resolving this energy-climate conundrum will require major conservation efforts, the prioritizing of essential non-substitutable uses of fossil fuels and the banning of frivolous ones.

[2] The reasoning is simple. Because they facilitate growth and (over) consumption, globalization and trade have enabled many densely-populated high-income countries (e.g., most Western European nations and Japan) to greatly exceed their domestic carrying capacities. These nations live mostly on imported biocapacity—they are runnings 'ecological deficits' with other nations and the global commons (Rees 2013, WWF 2016). Not every country can be a net importer of bio-resources, so the development path worn by so-called First-world nations cannot be followed by developing countries. (Note that the bloated eco-footprints of many high-income countries make them effectively more over-populated than are poorer countries with nominally higher population densities.)

[3] Contrary to politicians' assertions, there is an unavoidable conflict between material economic growth and 'the environment'. The larger the human enterprise, the more diminished the ecosphere. *H. Sapiens* has competitively displaced countless other species from their habitats and food resources. From only 1% 10,000 years ago, humans and their domestic livestock had grown to comprise more than 97% of Earth's mammalian biomass by 2000 (Smil 2011). This number may be closer to 98.5% in 2017.

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litical turmoil and resource wars. In the circumstances, opponents of the present prescription have an obligation to propose an alternative plan that similarly promises ecological stability, economic security, social equity and improved population health to future generations.

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William E. Rees, PhD, FRSC, is a professor at the University of British Columbia who pioneered ecological footprinting.

Obituary

Vale Bryan Furnass, 1927 - 2017

By Jenny Goldie

Long-time SPA member, doctor, environmentalist, academic, inveterate letter writer, author, gardener and friend of many, Bryan Furnass, died on 4 March at his Canberra home aged 89.

A descendant of Samuel Crompton, the inventor of the spinning mule which heralded the Industrial Revolution, Bryan was born in the industrial city of Manchester, England. This was 1927 – the year Charles Lindberg completed the first trans-Atlantic flight. Later, the bombing of industrial sites during World War II forced his father's school for the deaf and the family to move to the Cheshire countryside. Bryan gave up rugby to concentrate on vegetable growing as part of Britain's 'Dig for Victory' campaign. He retained a love of gardening throughout his life.

At the end of the war, Bryan attended Oxford University medical school on a scholarship. He completed his post-graduate studies at Middlesex Hospital medical school where he met his future wife, Anne. Marriage had to wait, however, until his return from two years in Sierra Leone, part of his required military national service with the Royal Army Medical Corps. At this time he specialised in tropical medicine.

In 1956, Bryan and Anne were married. The first of their five children arrived two years later with the birth of twins. Bryan had experienced the 1952 Great London Smog which killed at least 4,000 people. He felt London was not the ideal place to bring up toddlers and thus the family migrated to Australia as '10-pound Poms' in 1960. (Bryan subsequently felt guilty about having five children, nevertheless, he was always the devoted father.)

Life in Australia began in Goulburn, NSW, as a physician. Then, after working in private practice in Canberra, he became foundation director of the Australian National University Health Service, a role he held for 25 years until his retirement in 1991. Here his sometimes unorthodox approach to community health was enthusiastically supported by university management.

As Bryan's retirement progressed, so did his passion for the environment. He moved from the health of the individual to the health of the planet. He became further alarmed at what he saw as irresponsible attitudes towards the maintenance of the biological and physical systems that are essential for the planet's wellbeing and thus the health of human populations. To this end, he coined the term 'Sustainocene' – a future era that is sustainable for both humans and other species but one that demands changes in environmental conservation and human behaviours.

Bryan Furnass

Bryan was larger than life. He was gregarious, sociable, academic, caring, and a hopeless romantic. He was a husband, father, grandfather and was thrilled to become a great-grandfather for the first time last year. For his family and many friends, his death leaves an enormous gap.

Jenny acknowledges material from Bryan's eulogy presented by his son-in-law, Mark Connelly.

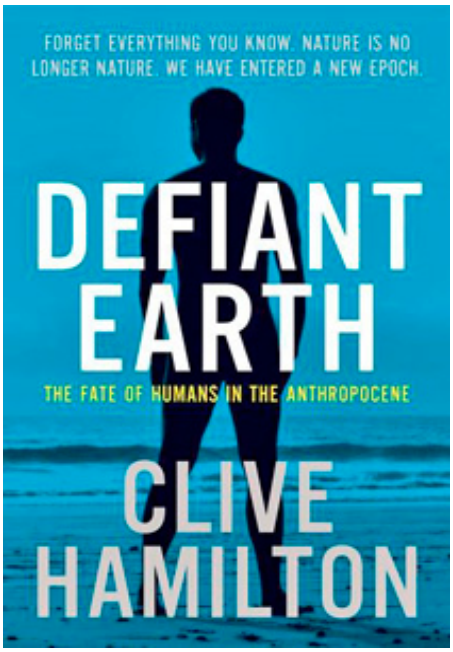
Book review

Defiant Earth: the fate of humans in the Anthropocene

By Clive Hamilton

Allen & Unwin, 200pp, $29.99

Review by John Coulter



This book is about the most important issue: humanity's power to disrupt the Earth system. Population growth and technologically facilitated resource exploitation now threatens humanity's future. So pervasive and long-lasting have the effects of this shift become that our age should be reclassified from the Holocene to the Anthropocene. No longer can we say remove humans and Nature will bounce back to its Holocene tranquility; the effects of changes in the CO_2 content of the atmosphere will last for thousands of years as will the mass extinction of species and a host of other environmental impacts. We have entered a new age. Hamilton summarises his message in a few words early in the book: "So today the greatest tragedy is the absence of a sense of the tragedy".

But this volume is really two books that may have been better separated. The first is well summarised in Hamilton's own article in *The Guardian* https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2017/may/05/the-great-climate-silence-we-are-on-the-edge-of-the-abyss-but-we-ignore-it and in a recorded interview https://fuzzylogicon2xx.podbean.com/e/planet-interrupted/ . Neither of these mentions book two which occupies the major portion of Defiant Earth: a dissection of the history, philosophy, religion, politics and economics which, embedded within the growing power of industrial technology, has brought us to the edge of this abyss.

The disruption of the Earth system contains a number of paradoxes. Evolution did not 'intend' to produce a pinnacle species whose powers would rival those of Nature, but Hamilton argues such is the gulf between us and other living creatures, that we are special. The task is to exercise our power so as to protect the further course of evolution. Hamilton speaks of an Earth system "fighting back", yet really the Earth system is only doing what it has always done: respond to impacts in ways determined by its inherent laws. These laws – laws that were and are understandable by humans – should have been taken into account. Svante Arrhenius predicted and calculated the extent to which increased CO_2 could increase global temperature more than 120 years ago.

Much of this book two revolves around discussion of "freedom" and "necessity", terms that Hamilton does not define. His context implies an unfettered and at times an irresponsible freedom – irresponsible when judged by its consequences. Necessity appears to be that which appears necessary "at the time". He rejects in a single sentence the notion that "consistency" (non-contradiction) can provide a direction for humanity. But despite a large part of the book arguing about the exercise of freedom and necessity he fails to mention Hegel's aphorism made famous in Garrett Hardin's 1967 *Tragedy of the Commons*: "Freedom is the *recognition* of necessity" (emphasis added). I think this means that one could only ever be truly free if one recognised the bounds within which that freedom can be exercised. Behaviour outside those knowable and understandable bounds will inevitably end in the kind of mess in which humans are now immersed.

The Enlightenment grew from a belief that everything in and about the world was knowable; that the laws governing the world were consistent and understandable. Science has been built on that belief. Surely carrying that principle of comprehensive consistency over into our present predicament could provide a direction if not an ethical motivation. Is it that our leaders do not understand this comprehensive consistency principle or do they deliberately choose to ignore it? Is it inevitable that evolution should produce a destructive pinnacle species? If humans were to disappear, would another chimpanzee arrive at the same conflicted crossroad in another 6 million years? I don't know and neither does Hamilton.

Where might we find the motivation to behave in this comprehensively consistent way? Hamilton points to the marvellous creativity of humans, technical brilliance, insights into ourselves, our music and science itself. All this could be lost; what wanton vandalism. There is another source. Stephen Boyden has pointed out that of the 6 million years of human evolution, for 99.99% of the time we lived in small groups in close contact with Nature. Nature framed our physiology and our psychology. Fulfilling these atavistic needs is an important part of a fully human destiny. Therein lies a major impediment to healing the rift with the Earth system. Increasingly, humans are born into a non-Nature world. Is this the source of the "absence of a sense of the tragedy"?

The challenge of the Anthropocene and this book is to recognise and exercise our comprehensively informed responsibility for the functioning of the Earth system.

Dr John Coulter is a life member of SPA.

Book review

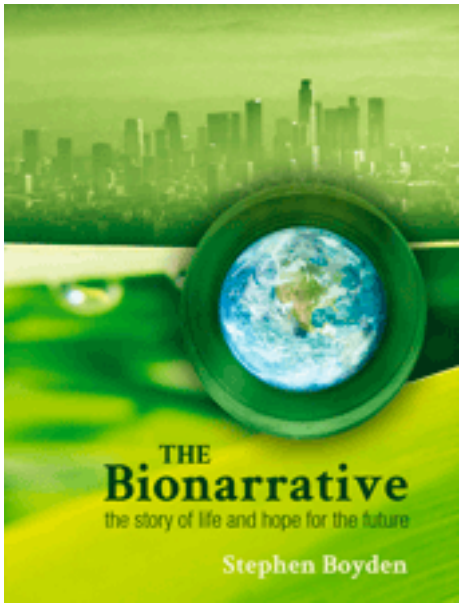
The Bionarrative: the story of life and hope for the future

by Stephen Boyden

ANU Press, 162pp, $38

(or free download from https://press.anu.edu.au/publications/bionarrative)

Review by Jenny Goldie



We are in ecological crisis and face collapse of civilisation. This is the grim warning of Stephen Boyden, Emeritus Professor at the Australian National University, and long-term friend of SPA.

Boyden argues that the massive growth in human population and the great intensification of resource and energy use lie at the heart of this ecological crisis.

We can avoid collapse, however, if we shift to a new kind of society, one that is in tune with the processes of life and that promotes the health and wellbeing of all its citizens as well as the ecosystems that sustain it. In other words, our culture must become 'biosensitive'.

A biosensitive society will have a sound understanding of the story of life on Earth (that is, of evolution) and the human place in nature. It must hold profound respect for the processes of life.

If we are to do this, we have to understand the 'bionarrative' – the story of life on Earth including the emergence and growth of human civilisation. This story includes the interactions between humans and the rest of the living world.

As human cultures evolved, they usually embraced information of good practical value. Often, however, they made assumptions that caused human distress or damage to local ecosystems. For 40 generations in China, for instance, women's feet were bound for aesthetic purposes but caused great pain to the women. In more modern times, humans have developed weapons of mass destruction that threaten life itself.

Boyden argues we need a 'biorenaissance' – a reawakening of the world's prevailing cultures to the reality that humans are part of nature and totally dependent on the processes of life for their wellbeing and survival. We must keep these processes healthy if we are to survive.

Once this shift in priorities – this cultural transformation – has taken place, other changes will naturally follow, such as changes in energy use and the economic system. All these are critical to the survival of civilisation.

Boyden describes four phases of human history: hunter-gatherer beginning 200,000 years ago with the use of fire; early farming from 12,000 years ago; early urban from 8,000 years ago; and the 'exponential' phase that began with the industrial revolution and now is morphing into the Anthropocene. We now need a fifth phase: the biosensitive society.

What would a biosensitive society entail? It means minimal use of fossil fuels; extensive reforestation to capture carbon; consuming energy and materials at sustainable levels; maximising local food production; maintaining clean water supplies; protecting the health of soils; returning organic waste to farmlands; no release of pollutants into the air, water or soil; and no weapons of mass destruction.

Because human evolution is relatively slow, we still have the same physical and psychosocial needs of our hunter-gatherer ancestors. As well as clean air and a nutritional diet, we still need, for instance, an emotional support network, conviviality, opportunities for creative behaviour, variety in daily experience, and a lifestyle that is conducive to a 'sense of personal involvement, purpose, belonging, responsibility, challenge, comradeship and love'.

Twenty-five years ago, on his retirement, Boyden founded the Nature and Society Forum (NSF) which recently changed its name to the Frank Fenner Foundation (FFF) after its beloved late patron (and SPA's as well). This Canberra-based organisation has been in the forefront of thinking about what it is to be a human in society. 'Healthy people on a healthy planet' has been its motto and, indeed, is the name of the final chapter of this book.

What I have always found endearing about Boyden and the work of NSF/FFF, has been the recognition of human social needs in the scheme of things: as well as food, clothing and shelter, we all need an emotional support network and conviviality. Who would not want to be part of a genuinely convivial society?

SPA's original name was Australians for an Ecologically Sustainable Population, which was too long but nevertheless summed up what we are all about. Boyden naturally supports the concept of ecological sustainability but believes we have to go further and embrace the human element.

As far as population numbers are concerned, mere stabilisation may not be enough. Boyden argues there must be 'adjustment' of global and regional populations to levels that do not cause progressive damage to the planet's ecosystems.

This relatively short, easy-to-read book provides a roadmap of how we can survive. We must take heed.

Branch reports

New South Wales

The focus of the NSW branch over the past couple of months has been the hosting of the national AGM on 29 April. This took place at the Sydney Mechanics' School of Arts in the city.

About 35 SPA members attended the AGM, which went smoothly due to the hard work of the committee and other NSW SPA members, who all worked together as a team. The forum in the afternoon was attended by a similar number. There were four sessions on the theme 'Population – the way forward'. These sessions afforded an opportunity for those present to become acquainted with our new national president, James Ward, and the branch presidents of Queensland, NSW and Victoria-Tasmania, as well as having the opportunity to hear life member and former national president Jenny Goldie speaking on her insights into some achievements of the organisation.

A dinner for 20 SPA members and friends was held in the evening at the Castlereagh Boutique Hotel nearby.

We thank all who helped this day be a success.

Nola Stewart, branch rep

Victoria-Tasmania

Things have been a little quieter for the Vic-Tas branch since our successful participation during February's Sustainable Living Festival. However, a number of activities and projects have been bubbling away over the past couple of months. These include:

* A social lunch with volunteers who helped out at the SLF stall. This was a great way for volunteers to get together socially and debrief about their experiences at the SLF stall. All volunteers had a very positive experience, with some recommendations on improvements for future events. A 'help sheet' is in the process of being created which will provide tips to future volunteers in communicating the population issue to the wider public.

* Branch secretary, Jill Quirk, gave a presentation at the U3A in March, discussing the implications of Melbourne growing to 8 million people. The response was positive and the presentation was covered by Candobetter.

*Our vice-president, Jenny Warfe, is secretary of the Port Phillip Conservational Council, and through her work there has been in a position to advocate for sustainable population concerns. Jill Quirk gave a talk to the council on 15 May on population-related issues.

*Branch member Ian Penrose and myself as branch president both met individually with state Coalition MP Tim Smith regarding the shadow government's population taskforce. Ian attended and participated in a community forum in Berwick run by the population taskforce. I wrote a submission in response to the taskforce discussion paper on behalf of the branch.

*I was approached recently by the 'Sustainability Association' following my presentation made at the Regional Development conference, due to public interest in the issue following the talk. An article was submitted to the association that will be included in their monthly journal (at this stage, planned for the June edition).

*I met with federal Labor MP Peter Khalil, who has succeeded Kelvin Thomson in the seat of Wills. The meeting was positive, with Khalil identifying town planning issues associated with population growth in Melbourne. He seemed keen on the idea of hosting a community forum on town planning issues later this year with participation from SPA.

*I interviewed an indigenous advocate in Canberra who has also been involved with the political party Sustainable Australia. He was interviewed on population sustainability issues from an indigenous perspective. The interview is in the final stages of editing as an article and will hopefully be published in the near future.

*The branch is anticipating several events during June, including an anti-development rally in Melbourne and a branch social dinner. Branch members will be informed as soon as details are confirmed.

Michael Bayliss, branch president

Western Australia

Another copy of the 'Three Overs' book was delivered, this time to the Brixton St Wetlands Conservation group. Their delegate at the last Conservation Council of WA meeting had requested a copy after John Weaver, our nominated delegate, had again displayed a copy to the council. As a voting member group, SPA is supporting the proposal for the Great Western Woodlands to be declared a national park, an initiative pushed for many years by Emeritus Professor Harry Recher. Conservation Council has a new president, Carmen Lawrence, a former premier of WA and is striving to exert more influence. Harry Cohen, SPA WA's president, also attended a meeting with Greens Senator Rachel Siewert of those who had served in past years as presidents of the council. Initiatives appear to be under way to strengthen conservation issues in WA in the face of strong economic and business lobbies.

Patricia (Paddy) Weaver, branch rep

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Branch reports

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ACT

On 11 March, Julian Cribb gave a talk based on his latest book, *Surviving the 21st Century*, (and reviewed in newsletter No. 125). He discussed the many existential threats facing humankind but gave some hope as to how they may be overcome.

The branch AGM was held on 13 May. Julia Richards stepped from the position of secretary that she had occupied for many years. We all owe her a large debt of gratitude. Margaret Roseby is our new secretary and the remainder of the committee is unchanged.

After the AGM there were three short presentations. Jenny Goldie summarised events in the population debate at the national level and beyond. Then Adrian Gibbs talked about progress in establishing a centre at the ANU for the study of human survival. This is an initiative of the Emeritus Faculty. Following this, Bob Douglas gave a talk titled 'Transformation in the context of existential risk' and clearly demonstrated the need for universities to engage in examining risks to humanity. Bob noted that "... Oxford University has recently developed a substantial initiative called 'The Future of Humanity'; Cambridge has developed a 'Centre for the Study of Existential Risk'; and the University of Sydney has recently appointed a Chair in Planetary Health. Universities can be the starting point for radically rethinking the way society operates." I note that the centre in Cambridge is appropriately located in the David Attenborough Building.

Nick Ware, branch president

Queensland

On 13 May, the Queensland branch kicked off our season of stalls at community festivals at Hillbrook School's Sustainability Day. We collaborated with 'Transition the Grove' to run a successful 'sustainability discussion tent'. A short quiz engaged people with discussion-starters on peak oil, population and community resilience topics. Some interesting discussions were had, exploring people's perspectives and preconceptions to a much deeper level than most market-stall encounters. Next on the schedule is the Logan Enviro Action Festival on 28 May, and the Sunshine Coast Environment Council's World Environment Day festival at Maroochydore on 4 June. We'd love to see SPA members at these events – if you're planning to attend, do drop by and introduce yourself. If you have an hour or three to spare to help on the stall, that would be wonderful – please email the branch (qld@population.org.au) to let us know. On 29 July we will once again be at the Geography Teachers' Conference, where we always draw a lot of interest. If there are any teachers out there among the membership, some tips on creating curriculum-ready resources would be gratefully received!

Jane O'Sullivan, branch president

Australian population inquiries

Australia has had a number of national population inquiries. The first and most comprehensive was the National Population Inquiry (NPI), often referred to as the 'Borrie Commission', which worked over the early 1970s and presented its main report to the government in 1975 and a supplementary report in 1978.

In December 1991 the Population Issues Committee of the National Population Council presented its report entitled *Population Issues and Australia's Future* to the government.

Then in December 1994 the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Long Term Strategies presented its report on *Australia's Population 'Carrying Capacity'*.

This extract is from 'An Australian Population Policy', Parliament of Australia, Research Paper 17 (1996-97)

http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/rp/RP9697/97rp17

President's snippets

2017 AGM and forum

The AGM was well attended – thanks to the NSW branch for a good turnout, and to all who travelled from further afield to join us. Outgoing president Sandra Kanck summarised the changes to the SPA national executive in her final snippets in the March newsletter, so nothing further to report there.

The main voting activity concerned three changes – two to the constitution (regarding the appointment of vacant positions within the executive, and the authority to approve withdrawal of funds) and one to membership (regarding the removal of household membership). All three motions were passed with a large majority. Please rest assured, the decision to end household memberships will be acted on slowly as memberships come up for renewal, and those of you who have a household membership will be given plenty of notice of how it might affect your household at that time.

The afternoon forum went well. We had a fascinating talk from Graham Wood where he applied formal risk-assessment protocols (from the aviation industry) to activities that contribute to climate change. Jenny Goldie talked us through the rather depressingly slow progress on population during the 29 years of SPA's existence. Jane O'Sullivan gave a walk-through of the SPA website and Michael Bayliss showed us the Facebook presence. Interestingly, the Facebook site 'Sustainable Population Australia Discussion Page' has more than 2,400 members – some four times SPA's formal membership! I also gave a talk suggesting we frame the post-growth population (and steady-state economy) using more positive language, proposing

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President's snippets

'maturity' so that the pro-growth lobby finds itself arguing in favour of immaturity.

Executive activities

Most of our activities of late have concerned the AGM and our big face-to-face meeting held in Sydney on the following day.

Within that meeting, we were fortunate to have a one-hour conversation over Skype with Kelly O'Shannassy, CEO of the Australian Conservation Foundation. This was a really enlightening meeting, and quite positive. ACF recently withdrew its set of policies (including one on population) from its website, and has adopted a campaign-based strategy for its operations. Its current campaigns include 'Shift to clean energy and cut pollution' and 'Speak out for a nuclear-free future', among others – all noble causes. However, tackling overpopulation isn't something that naturally fits into its type of campaigning.

Population has been (or has become?) a divisive issue within groups like the ACF, and they are understandably wary of opening up old wounds. However, we reached an agreement with Kelly to continue to look for opportunities to cooperate, which has begun with me sending her our policy recommendations to ensure she understands what we are on about. I'll keep you posted.

The final point to report is that we are keenly pursuing opportunities to raise the profile of SPA, and the population issue, across various media (print, radio, TV, and digital/social). We already have the Facebook page, the website, and I have reinvigorated SPA's Twitter account (@SustPopAus). We're also planning to invest in some short videos and have bought an additional website domain called 'PopCulture' to serve as a clearinghouse for population media. We are looking into several exciting fundraising opportunities (including a very generous donation offer) that could allow us to employ someone to dedicate their time to such activities.

James Ward, SPA national president

James Ward

About SPA

Website: www.population.org.au

The SPA newsletter is published quarterly: in March, June, September and December. Members are welcome to submit material to the editor, to be published at the editor's discretion.

Membership applications and renewals should be done via the SPA website or sent to the national office. General inquiries should also go to the national office.

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