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Media ignore link between eco-problems, population



"A common journalistic mistake is simply to cover events — real or staged — and ignore underlying issues"

— R. Griffin
in "Interpreting Public Issues"

In 1971, a Gallup poll found that 41 percent of Americans believe population growth was a serious problem for the United States while only 13 percent felt it would never be a problem.

Two decades later, the percentage of Americans who view population growth as a problem has surprisingly diminished. A 1992 Gallup survey showed only 29 percent of Americans believe population growth is a serious problem while 24 percent feel it never will be.

Only a year earlier, another poll found that 71 percent of Americans support strong environmental protection, even at the expense of economic growth.

Why does interest in the environment grow while concern about population wanes? In part because the media tend to ignore population pressures in its reports about the environment.

"While environmental problems may have achieved more and better coverage in the past five years, the public still has no inkling that population growth causes many of those problems," reports Mike Maher, a University of Texas graduate student who has studied media coverage of the relationship between population and environment.

In a recent study, Maher randomly selected 150 newspaper articles that focused on either endangered species, urban sprawl or water shortages, then analyzed them to see what connection the paper made between the subject problem and population growth.

"Of the 150-article sample, 16 mention population growth as a cause of the environmental problem described in the story," Maher reported. "Population growth appears in eight urban-sprawl stories, seven water-storage stories and one story on endangered species. Only one article in 150 mentions that policies to stabilize population might be a possi-

ble solution.

"Newspapers, magazines and wire services in cities across the U.S. and Canada pervasively crop from the story the environmental problem-causing nature of human population growth," Maher reported. "While ignoring that a stable population might be a solution to environmental problems, the media instead direct our attention to palliative solutions: build new dams to supply water, zone to prevent urban sprawl, set aside land for endangered species.

"What confuses people about the nature of their predicament is that these solutions may be effective for a short period of time. But none will work over the long term. Population growth will eventually necessitate even more dams, more zoning, more endangered species conflicts. Eventually there will be no more runoff to dam, no more untrammelled land to protect. Before the drought broke, California development interests were actually considering towing in polar icebergs, building a pipeline to Alaska's river and importing Canadian water in tanker ships to get more fresh water. To such depths have we sunk in order to keep population off the agenda."

Editors and reporters might feel that by linking population growth to environmental problems they cross the line between objectivity and advocacy. Indeed, many in the media have been accused of skewing facts to promote an environmental agenda. That might be true in some cases, but it's no reason to ignore the problems population growth can cause.

No doubt many reporters and edi-

tors don't deliberately ignore population growth, but rather have a blind spot for such a slow process. As Molly Ivins, a quick-witted Texas columnist, noted, the media often fail to cover the stories that "seep and creep." No one bothers to hold a daily press conference to announce that world population has grown by 250,000.

Noting the relationship between population growth and environmental degradation isn't advocacy, but rather sound reporting. If you'd like a copy of Maher's report, "How the News Media Frame the Population: Environment Connection," write to me at the address below.

If you have a suggestion for a column, a gripe, a success story or whatever, write it down and send it to me, care of the Columbia Daily Tribune, PO Box 798, Columbia, Mo., 65205.