

**J. SCOTT CHRISTIANSON**

## Readers express views on population, environment



Earlier this year, I began writing more about human population growth and its impact on the environment and our future. Since then, several readers have sent comments on the issue.

One Columbia man wrote, "I found your article concerning world population, July 8, interesting.... Certainly, our country should no longer allow countries that are encouraging or permitting population growth beyond their abilities to send their surplus to us. People and countries will be forced to take responsibility for limiting population to numbers that can be sustained at at least a minimally adequate standard of living and in at least a tolerable environment."

Immigration policy is one of the most controversial issues concerning U.S. population growth. Immigrants account for 1 million of the 3 million people added to U.S. population annually. Many environmental groups advocate limiting immigration because people in the United States have a greater environmental impact than those in other countries. They argue that keeping people in their native lands — and out of the United States — helps the environment.

Many people, however, see limits on immigration as racist. In some ways, I can see their point. We have gained much of our wealth and prosperity by extracting resources from other countries, so why shouldn't we allow other people to immigrate here?

Another man sent some very insightful comments concerning a recent column about the world's maximum sustainable population.

"The question of finding the exact optimum population is probably less important than deciding whether the optimum is at, below, or above current population levels. If you begin by asking 'How many people can we feed?' under assumptions about the agricultural productivity that might be possible with future technology, you can arrive at very large numbers.... This is how numbers like 40 billion are arrived at.

"If you begin by asking how much the land and resource base of humanity must contract in order to end the loss of biological diversity — currently occurring at a rate probably a thousand times greater than during the last Ice Age — you arrive at smaller numbers than present levels.

"The exact numbers don't matter. What matters is the direction in which land use and the resources of the planet are taken. In one direction, all resources belong to one species, us, and as our numbers expand, we utilize those resources more 'efficiently.' Extinction proceeds as far as necessary under the assumption that most of biological diversity is not necessary to our survival and that technological substitutes can always be found for the services of most organisms, particularly if there is sufficient energy. A sort of space-

colony Earth is the target, micro-managed by humans and computers.

"In the other direction, human utilization of the planet and human numbers shrink till ecological health is restored, as evidenced by the end of the current mass extinction. In this scenario, humans surrender resources back to other species in order to ensure their survival."

Another Columbian sent me an article titled "Overpopulation Myths Ignore Realities of Progress," with the admonitions "Don't believe everything Planned Parenthood tells you," and "Is it someone else who is the 'too many' or is it you?"

The article argues that overpopulation is not a problem because technology will save us. It concludes nonsensically, that "Although there are now more people in the world than ever before, by any meaningful measure the world is actually becoming relatively less populated." In fact, the effects of our increasing human population are becoming more and more evident — faith in technological salvation is misplaced and, at best, dangerous.

Nancy Elser of Columbia wrote, "One of the top issues that needs to be addressed in your columns about population is women's health issues. Until women have open access to contraceptives and the freedom to use them as they see fit — not as dictated by men — the world's human population will continue to grow beyond the earth's capacity to sustain it."

Part of the reason that I haven't written more about the linkage between women's health and population issues is that I am still not educated enough to write intelligently on the topic. However, there is an excellent article in the latest edition of *Scientific American* that presents a global perspective on women's health issues. I highly recommend it.

What are your thoughts? Send them to 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.