

## EDITORIAL

### Population and Natural Resources

John H. Perkins, PhD

In this issue we're pleased to publish a statement by Jennifer M. Belcher, Commissioner of Public Lands in Washington State (see pages 66–67). Our reasons for publishing this piece are worth noting. In addition, Commissioner Belcher raises some points meriting further comment.

Why did we seek this contribution for publication in NAEP's journal? Most importantly, Ms. Belcher places natural resource management into a framework that is worthy of emulation: impacts on the environment and natural resources are functions of population growth, technology choices for resource exploitation, and the high standard of living enjoyed by many Americans. This way of analyzing environmental problems dates at least to the early 1970s, so it is not exactly new. Still, it is not always used, which is a pity.

Ms. Belcher deserves praise for guiding her agency into this framework, especially considering that her position is elected. Washington State is different from many other states, particularly the "older" ones east of the Mississippi River. As a "young" state (organized 1889), Washington was allocated an enormous amount of land held by the US Government as part of the statehood process.

Washington created the Commissioner of Public Lands as a state-wide elected position, and the Commissioner is obliged to manage the State's public lands, and their revenues, for the good of the State, particularly for supporting public education. Maximizing short-term revenues in the name of a "mandate" can interfere with a longer

term management philosophy. Ms. Belcher's success in guiding resource management with a more holistic philosophy may provide a worthy model for other States to consider. We certainly recommend that they try.

In an era of necessarily specialized environmental work, we think it's important to remember that environmental problems arise from interactions of many complicated factors. It's easy to develop the single-issue syndrome, but professionals working to solve problems must never forget that good solutions are very likely to be multifaceted. Environmental impacts from population, technology, and affluence are likely to be intertwined in complex ways. Ms. Belcher's piece warrants attention because she's trying to lead in ways that acknowledge these interactions.

The reasons for publishing this piece were thus compelling, but a few issues need elaboration. Perhaps the most controversial is the very prospect of raising *population* as an issue for environmental and resource managers. We do this with some trepidation, because discussions of population have a nasty tendency to degenerate into nonsense, even among intelligent, well meaning people.

Why is this so? Most likely the matter stems from the fact that when people start to talk about population they venture into an arena charged with high emotions. To discuss the environmental significance of the *numbers* of people, and how those numbers are changing, too often leads to moral and political arguments about birth control, immigration, racial and ethnic stocks, religious factions, and eugenics. If these issues weren't enough to arouse the blood pressure, someone will sooner or later toss in abortion, at which point it's likely that all rational debate will cease.

Thus it took real political courage for Commissioner Belcher to even broach the sub-

ject of population. But she did, and she did it in a productive and skillful way. Perhaps, of course, our opinions on population simply match those of Ms. Belcher. However, one can point to specific ways in which her statements emerge as constructive, not destructive:

- Gloom about catastrophe from overpopulation is absent. Instead, the debate is put in more biological terms: yes, population matters, but so do a lot of other issues; population is just one factor to consider.
- No effort is made to slam shut the gates at the Washington State border. Such an act is, of course, impossible, because federal law governs migration both within the US (i.e., there can be no restrictions) and into the US.
- No division of "us" and "them" appears. This is important: too often in recent years, elected officials have taken up the population issue in ways that appeal to the fears and prejudices that exist within each and every one of us, all in the name of winning votes.

Environmental professionals need to understand the sources of environmental problems. We always recommend paying attention to the interactions among (a) population, (b) technology choice, and (c) affluence. Professionals need to deal with population in a way that promotes healthy discussion, not name calling. We think Commissioner Belcher has provided a worthy model.

---

*Address correspondence to John H. Perkins, The Evergreen State College, Olympia, WA 98505; (fax) 360-866-6794; (e-mail) perkinsj@elwha.evergreen.edu*