

Environmentalists: Ban the (Population) Bomb

After years of silence on the issue, conservationists urge the United States to lead the fight against population growth

ASK ALMOST ANY ENVIRONMENTALIST THE underlying cause of the world's major environmental problems and the answer is likely to be—too many people. Yet for more than two decades the word *population* has been conspicuously absent from public statements by most major environmental groups in the United States. The reason: fear of the right-to-life movement, which has linked population control with abortion, making the issue too hot to handle. But now, environmentalists, finding strength in numbers—and discovering that they have some political clout of their own—are apparently no longer afraid of taking on the political right.

Last week leaders of more than 100 environmental and conservation organizations—including such giants as the World Wildlife Fund, the Sierra Club, and the National Wildlife Federation—joined leading population groups in signing a joint priority statement calling for the nations of the world to make an effective response to rapid population growth. The statement signals the beginning of a political campaign, directed at Congress and the Administration, aimed at getting the United States to exert stronger leadership on global overpopulation.

"There's been enormous pressure from the right-to-life groups on most of these [environmental] organizations to keep them from speaking out on population issues and throwing their support behind efforts in Congress to fund international family planning programs," says U.S. Representative Chet Atkins (D-MA), the current chair of the Congressional Coalition on Population and Development. The right-to-life movement has also had a powerful effect on national policy, curtailing U.S. assistance in international family planning efforts.

But in the wake of Earth Day '90 and the enormous publicity that surrounded it, environmental groups seem to have acquired new political confidence. Says Diane Sherman of Zero Population Growth: "Many of these [environmental] organizations have gone through a skirmish or two with the [right-to-life] groups and found that while they can be scary, they're just a vocal minority." Adds Claudine Schneider, former U.S. representative from Rhode Island and now a fellow at Harvard's Institute

of Politics: "More and more Americans are identifying themselves as environmentalists, and with being concerned about the environment, and that message is getting through to the politicians."

And what does the environment-population alliance plan to do with its newly Jane Fonda-ized political muscles? The main goal is to get the United States to kick in its share of the international effort to limit population growth. The blueprint for this effort comes from the "Amsterdam Forum world stabilization strategy," developed in 1989 at a UN conference and signed by 79 countries, including the United States.

The Amsterdam strategy calls for each developed nation to commit 4% of its foreign aid budget to international population programs—which would provide \$9 billion a year. Most population experts believe this would be enough to offer every woman in the world access to family planning services. But U.S. population funding is far below this level: Spending in the current fiscal year is likely to be \$330 million, a little more than 2% of the total. Meeting the Amsterdam target for fiscal year 1992 would require an increase to \$570 million. Several weeks ago, a bipartisan coalition of 89 members of Congress sent a letter to Rep. David Obey (D-WI), chairman of the House subcommittee on foreign operations, requesting that U.S. international family planning assistance for fiscal year 1992 be increased to that level.

But Congress isn't the only target of the revved-up environmentalists. The other is the executive branch, where the aim is to get the Bush Administration to overturn the "Mexico City Policy." In 1984, at the UN-sponsored International Conference on Population in Mexico City, the Reagan Administration released a White Paper on population, which stated among other things that "the relationship between population growth and economic development is not a negative one." As Representative Atkins puts it: "That was voodoo demographics to go along with voodoo economics."

At the same time, the Reagan Administration announced its decision to cut off all funding for the UN Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) and International Planned Parenthood (IPP), the only multi-lateral organizations that work directly with governments to provide support for family planning services in more than 140 countries. This decision stemmed from charges that these two organizations funded abortions in China. Actually, neither organization funds abortions, but both support the right of a woman to have an abortion.

Despite the restrictions of the Mexico City policy, the U.S. State Department and its Agency for International Development continue to support international family planning programs by funding various independent contracting agencies. "We feel that over-

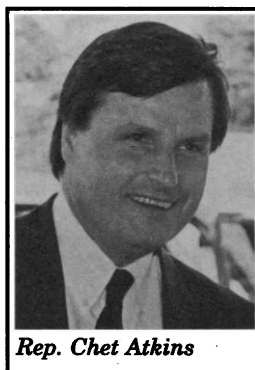
population is not a stabilizing factor, whether it be political stability, developmental stability, or environmental stability," says Nancy Carter, coordinator for population affairs in the State Department, "and this is reflected in the lead role that the United States has continued to take in helping countries come to grips with their individual problems."

While critics of the Administration agree with Carter and give credit to the State Department for making the most of a bad situation, they argue that the United States must do more. "When President Bush was in Congress and when he was the U.S. ambassador to the UN, he was one of the most vocal supporters of family planning assistance," says Werner Fornos, president of the Population Institute. "And we'd like to see him take that kind of leadership role again."

In fact, the White House seems to be coming around. One reason, according to a senior White House official who asked not to be named, is the Administration's concern about global warming. In a recent National Academy of Sciences report on global warming, the official noted, population growth was called, "the biggest single driver of atmospheric pollution." Responding partly to that concern, President Bush asked for an increase in this year's budget proposal of \$60 million in international family planning assistance over last year's level. The Administration has also endorsed a UN call for even higher levels of spending. And so it seems that both on the Hill and in the White House overpopulation is back on the political agenda.

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Rep. Chet Atkins