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POLICY BRIEF

Missing the Forest for the Trees: The Environmental Arguments of Immigration Restrictionists Miss the Point

by Walter A. Ewing, Ph.D.*

In the latest battle for control of the Sierra Club, immigration restrictionists are again using an “over-population” argument that is based on flawed environmental assumptions and offers no useful guide for fixing the broken U.S. immigration system.

The latest attempt by immigration restrictionists to take control of the Sierra Club is again casting a public spotlight on the question of whether immigration to the United States plays a significant role in the destruction of the environment. Anti-immigration activists failed in a 1998 referendum to persuade most Sierra Club members to make immigration restriction an official policy of the environmental organization, which was founded in 1892 by Scottish immigrant John Muir. This time, the restrictionists are attempting to win a majority on the Club's board of directors. As before, the restrictionist camp is using the neo-Malthusian argument that the United States must adopt stringent immigration controls in order to keep the U.S. population low and thereby minimize the amount of resources the nation consumes and the environmental destruction it causes. At first glance, this argument is attractive in its simplicity: less immigration, fewer people, more resources, a better environment. However, as with so many simple arguments about complex topics, it misses the point. Over-population is not the primary cause of U.S. environmental woes, and immigration

restrictions that remain blind to the economic realities which cause migration are doomed to failure.

“Over-Population” is Over Simplified

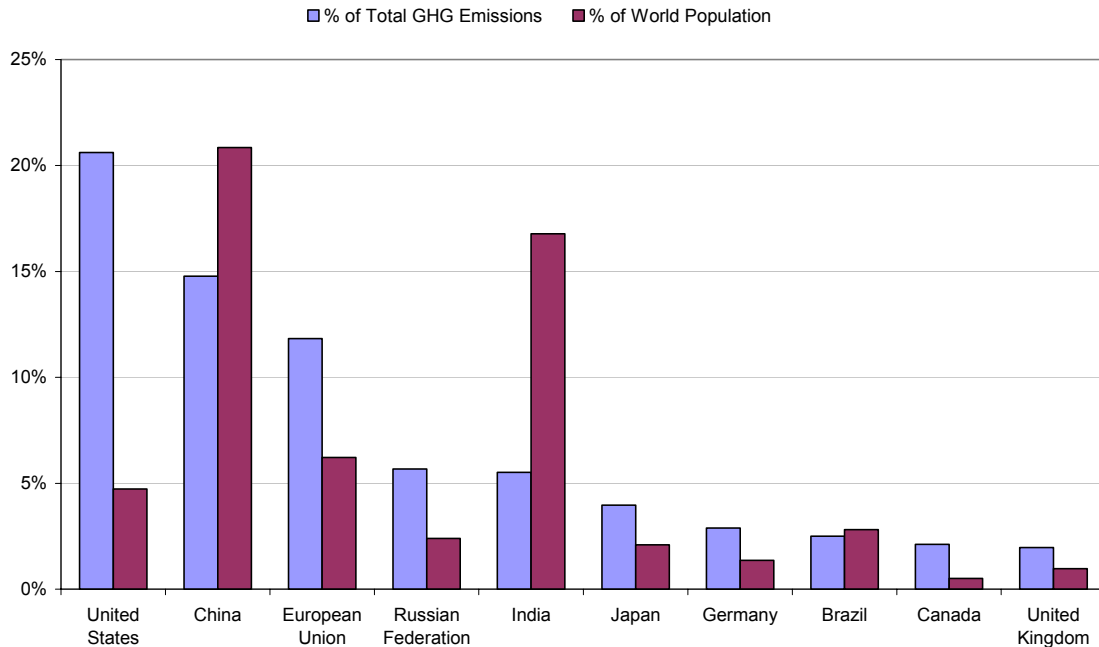
The central thesis of the immigration restrictionists, that environmental problems in the United States are largely the result of over-population, is simply not supported by the facts. According to data from the World Resources Institute, in 2000 the United States was home to 4.7 percent of the world's population, yet consumed 25.3 percent of all fossil fuels and generated 20.6 percent of all “green house gases,” such as carbon dioxide. In comparison, the 15 nations of the European Union,¹ which enjoy standards of living comparable to the United States,² collectively contained 6.2 percent of the world's population, consumed 14.8 percent of fossil fuels, and generated 11.8 percent of green house gases. In other words, despite containing 24 percent fewer people than the European Union, the United States consumed 70.9 percent more fossil fuels and produced 74.2 percent more green house gases.³

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Top 10 Producers of Green House Gases (GHGs) by Percentage of Total GHG Emissions and Percentage of World Population



(Source: Climate Analysis Indicators Tool (CAIT) version 1.5, World Resources Institute, Washington, DC, 2003.)

As this comparison illustrates, levels of resource consumption and environmental destruction are not directly correlated with population, even in countries with similar standards of living. Rather, they are conditioned by a host of other factors, such as the degree to which a society depends upon polluting and non-renewable fossil fuels; utilizes pollution-reduction technologies; develops systems of mass transit to minimize individual automobile use; uses plastics and other non-biodegradable materials in manufacturing and packaging consumer goods; recycles potentially recyclable materials; and controls agricultural run-off into waterways. Put differently, a few people can pollute a lot, or a lot of people can pollute a little, depending on the systems of production and consumption within a society. The problem is less about how many people are in the United States, and more about how the United States produces and consumes.

Arbitrary Limits Don't Work

Nevertheless, the restrictionists propose tougher immigration controls as a solution to the perceived problem of immigrant-fueled population growth. Implicit in this proposal is the assumption that immigration can be reduced simply by imposing arbitrary limits that bear no relationship to economic reality. However, the federal government already has demonstrated through its failed border-enforcement policy that this approach doesn't work. Since 1993, the federal government has spent \$23.4 billion on immigration enforcement, quintupling the annual immigration-enforcement budget to \$3.8 billion⁴ and nearly tripling the size of the U.S. Border Patrol to 10,835 agents.⁵ Yet during this time the number of undocumented immigrants living in the United States, principally Mexicans and Central Americans, has doubled to roughly 9 million.⁶ Rather than reducing migration, the U.S. enforcement strategy has

succeeded primarily in producing a boom in business for human smugglers and a rising body count of immigrants who die while crossing the southwest border.

The main reason these costly enforcement efforts have failed is that they ignore the economic forces which drive migration. Most immigrants come to the United States because they lack sufficient economic opportunities at home and because the U.S. labor market continues to generate demand for workers, particularly in the service sector, that is not being met by either the growth of the native-born labor force or current limits on legal immigration. Migration from Mexico in particular has increased over the past two decades because the U.S. and Mexican governments have actively promoted the economic integration of the two countries since at least 1986.⁷ As the past 11 years of federal border-enforcement efforts have made crystal

clear, immigration policies that ignore these larger economic forces merely drive migration underground rather than regulating it effectively in ways that are most beneficial to both sending and receiving societies.

Arguments without Substance

The over-population argument of immigration restrictionists is based on flawed environmental assumptions and offers no useful guide for fixing the broken U.S. immigration system. An anti-immigration pronouncement by a newly restrictionist Sierra Club, for instance, would do nothing to address the principal causes of environmental destruction in the United States, lessen the U.S. economy's demand for immigrant workers, or improve employment prospects in the communities from which immigrants come. Instead, it would only add a veneer of green xenophobia to a respected leader of the environmental movement.

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¹ Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden, United Kingdom.

² As measured by the United Nations' Human Development Index (United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2002: Deepening democracy in a fragmented world*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2002.)

³ World Resources Institute, Washington, DC: Climate Analysis Indicators Tool (CAIT) version 1.5 (Available at: <http://cait.wri.org>) & EarthTrends Country Profiles (Available at <http://earthtrends.wri.org>).

⁴ Department of Homeland Security and Department of Justice budget statistics.

⁵ *Testimony of Asa Hutchinson, Under Secretary for Border and Transportation Security, Department of Homeland Security, Before the Subcommittee on Immigration, Border Security, and Citizenship, Committee on the Judiciary, U.S. Senate*, February 12, 2004; Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse (TRAC), Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY.

⁶ Jeffrey S. Passel, Randy Capps & Michael Fix, "Undocumented Immigrants: Facts and Figures." Washington, DC: Urban Institute, January 12, 2004; U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, Office of Policy and Planning, *Estimates of the Unauthorized Immigrant Population Residing in the United States: 1990-2000*, January 31, 2003.

⁷ Douglas S. Massey, Jorge Durand & Nolan J. Malone, *Beyond Smoke and Mirrors: Mexican Immigration in an Era of Economic Integration*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002.