

## Environment, Population, and Health: Strategies for a More Secure World

**G**lobalization—the increasing interconnectedness of the modern world—has many consequences: cultural homogenization, such as the expansion of the English language; the spread of certain consumer products, like Coca-Cola, cars, and popular music; and economic interconnectedness, including the much-discussed overseas transfer of jobs. These consequences arouse strong feelings and emotional reactions, and sometimes, violent protests. The fundamental causes of globalization—more efficient communications and transport—are not going to change, but we can try to anticipate and control its consequences.

These facets of globalization seem new and unprecedented, and at first, we might think we have nothing to learn from history. In fact, history is full of examples of slower and spatially limited globalizations. A past society that appears to be the polar opposite of our globalized world, isolated Easter Island in the Pacific Ocean, encountered nearly fatal problems of population, environment, and health.

Easter Island's 11 clans depended on each other for food and other supplies, and to erect the island's famous statues. But after rampant population growth led to total deforestation,

Easter Island collapsed in an epidemic of cannibalism. The population crashed, war broke out between the clans, and people began throwing down other clans' statues. By 1840, all of the statues that the islanders had erected at great effort had been thrown down, the government had been overthrown, their religion had collapsed, and 90 percent of the people were dead. By the 1870s, the island, which had originally supported 15,000 people, had only 111 inhabitants. Because Easter Island is isolated, it is the purest case in history of an ecological collapse uninfluenced by neighboring societies. There were no friends to offer help or enemies to march in. All 11 clans—all sharing resources in a mini-globalized world—fell together.

Easter Island is a metaphor for the modern world. When the Easter Islanders got into trouble, there was no place to which they could flee and no one whom they could summon to help because Easter Island was isolated in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Similarly, if our modern society gets into trouble, there is no other planet from which we can seek help, and there is no other planet to which we are going to be able to flee. We are like Easter Island in the Pacific Ocean.

Our world is interconnected and interdependent, like Easter Island's 11 clans. Today, we face the same problems—loss of forests, fisheries, biodiversity, fresh water, and topsoil—that dragged down past societies. But for the first time in world history, we are producing or transporting toxic materials, greenhouse gases, and alien species. All these environmental problems are time bombs. The world is now on an unsustainable course, and these problems will be resolved one way or another, pleasantly or unpleasantly, within the next 50 years.

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Countries that are overwhelmed by environmental problems tend to develop political and economic problems. Ask a politically naïve ecologist to name the countries with the worst environmental and overpopulation problems. The environmentalist would say they include Afghanistan, Burundi, Haiti, Indonesia, Iraq, Madagascar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Rwanda, and the Solomon Islands. And then ask a First World politician who does not care about the environment to name the world's trouble spots, and the politician would say they include Afghanistan, Burundi, Haiti, Indonesia, Iraq, Madagascar, Nepal, Pakistan, Philippines, Rwanda, and the Solomon Islands. The two lists are identical because of cause and effect: people in countries with severe population, environment, and health problems get desperate. If they have no hope, they turn to drastic things like civil war and terrorism and make trouble not only for themselves but also for other countries.

In short, globalization is more than the First World sending the Third World good things, like Coca-Cola and the Internet. Globalization can go in two directions: "They" can send "us" bad things, such as terrorism, illegal immigrants, and diseases like SARS, malaria, and Ebola. It also means us sending them bad things in return. When Easter Island collapsed around 1680, its collapse did not affect anybody else in the world and nobody knew about it. Today, no society can collapse without affecting other societies. And so now, out of self-interest, we are involved with every other society in the world.

## What Can We Do?

Our current economic and political problems can be depressing. But I see hope for several reasons: first, all the problems that I have ticked off are problems that we caused. Every one of our problems—deforestation, overfishing, water scarcity, and toxic waste—is of our own making. Therefore, we can choose to stop causing them. Our success depends on a mix of small-scale, bottom-up solutions and large-scale, top-down solutions: individual steps to

manage our shared resources and governmental actions to prevent degradation.

Second, economics is on our side. A public health campaign to throttle the spread of tuberculosis and malaria would cost about \$25 billion. That seems like a lot of money until you consider that the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq cost \$80 billion to \$100 billion (and that does not include the tens or hundreds of billions for nation building and the subsequent military actions). It would be relatively cheap to solve the world's public health problems, which if left untreated, may ultimately lead to the explosions that cause us to send in our troops. For \$25 billion, we could start solving the world's ultimate problems; instead, we have chosen to solve just the proximate problems in a few places. The Band-Aids cost much more than the antibiotic.

Third, an especially effective strategy for dealing with population problems is to empower women to plan the size of their families. I often hear the argument that we Americans have no business telling others how many babies they should have and therefore we should not "force" family planning on anyone. But this is ignorant: people in the Third World know much better than any American the consequences of large families—they do not have enough money to feed their children, buy them clothes and books, or send them to school. They want the means to control their family size. Our government does not even have to actively provide the means; all it has to do is step back and stop interfering with private organizations that want to provide it.

Finally, individuals and groups of individuals can address these major problems relatively cheaply if we choose to do so:

***We can vote.*** In a democracy, the government's top-down actions result from the voters' bottom-up expressions of will. And some elections (as we have recently seen in the United States) are settled by small numbers of voters.

***We can join groups that pool their resources effectively.*** We can give modest sums of money to highly leveraged organizations. For example, World Wildlife Fund (WWF) has an



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annual budget of \$80 million to \$120 million, which seems like a lot of money until you consider that it is supposed to address all of the world's environmental problems. However, WWF is highly leveraged; if you give \$150, governments will chip in \$1000. Therefore, your modest contribution to highly effective, highly leveraged organizations can make a big impact.

***We can speak out on public policy matters.*** The great majority of academics are not only uninterested in speaking to the public, but also have reservations about it. They feel that if they speak to the public, it shows they are self-interested and no longer unbiased. It is also important to find people who are charismatic and well-known, such as Hollywood celebrities, and engage them. They are known by billions of people around the world and they could be effective messengers.

***We can encourage and support collaborations between big businesses and environmental organizations.*** Some of the most powerful forces in the world today are big businesses, and unfortunately, some use that power in environmentally destructive ways. However, quite a few realize that it is much cheaper to solve environmental problems at the outset rather than wait for a billion-dollar disaster like the Exxon Valdez spill, the Bhopal chemical plant, the Buffalo Creek coal mine in West Virginia, and the Panguna copper mine in Papua New Guinea. For the last six years, I have been work-

ing in Chevron Texaco's oil fields in Papua New Guinea, in collaboration with WWF, because Chevron Texaco decided, after the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill, that it would be cheaper to avoid oil spills than to clean them up. Another example: in 1993, a number of major logging companies got together with WWF to set standards for sustainable forestry and establish the Forest Stewardship Council to label consumer products. Similarly, six years ago, Unilever—the world's largest wholesaler of seafood products—became concerned that they were going to run out of seafood. Unilever collaborated with WWF to establish the Marine Stewardship Council, which sets standards for sustainable fishing.

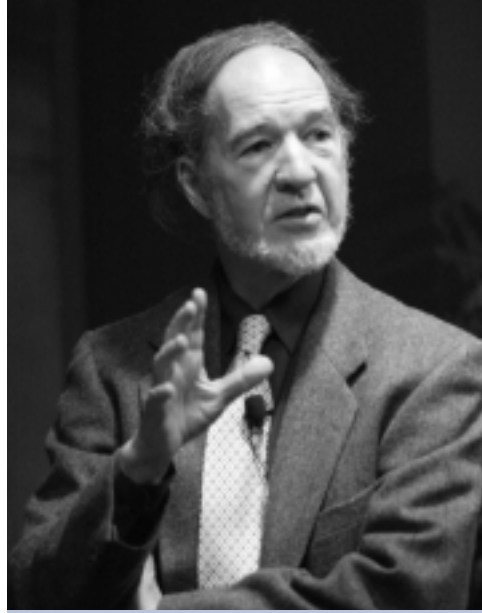
***We can exercise consumer choice.*** We can punish companies that damage the environment and patronize those that adhere to environmental standards like sustainability pledges. For example, consumers can choose seafood from well-managed fisheries, such as Alaska's wild salmon. Or, consumers can vent their wrath over the Valdez spill by not buying Exxon gas. Knowing where to express your views is much trickier in the mining industry, because there is a series of steps between the mines and the consumer. Gold mining, for example, can be frightfully destructive, spilling cyanide into streams. Like most consumers, I do not have the faintest idea where the gold for my wedding ring was mined. But we can identify the part of the business chain that is susceptible to pressure and knows where the gold is mined. About two years ago, Tiffany's Jewelers—one of the 10 major gold retailers in the United States—realized that its stores were going to be picketed, so it switched its business to a clean mining company, BHP in Australia. In industries like mining and logging, we can trace the supply chain to figure out where consumers can most profitably use their limited clout.

## Conclusion

We are the first society in human history that can learn from distant countries and the remote past. When we turn on our television sets, we

can see the consequences of ecological messes in Afghanistan and Baghdad and Somalia. We know what happened to Easter Island in 1680, the Anasazi in the southwestern United States in 1118, and the classic lower Mayan civilization in 810. We know about environmental disasters in the past and around the world, and we can choose to learn from these mistakes. The Easter Islanders, when their society was collapsing, did not know that Anasazi society had collapsed for the same reason 550 years before. We have the opportunity to learn; the Easter Islanders did not.

We are in the middle of an exponentially accelerating horse race. On one hand, the destructive forces in the world are increasing exponentially. On the other, the environmental movement is increasing exponentially. This horse race will be settled within the next 50 years, and it is up to you to influence which horse will win.



Jared Diamond (Credit: ©David Hawxhurst, Woodrow Wilson Center)

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**Editor's Note:** This commentary is an edited transcript of an address Dr. Diamond gave at the Woodrow Wilson Center on January 30, 2004.