

# DifferentTakes

## Conserving Racism: The Greening of Hate at Home and Abroad

By Betsy Hartmann

The greening of hate – blaming environmental degradation on poor populations of color – is once again on the rise, both in the U.S. and overseas. In the U.S., its illogic runs like this: immigrants are the main cause of overpopulation, and overpopulation in turn causes urban sprawl, the destruction of wilderness, pollution, and so forth. Internationally, it draws on narratives that blame expanding populations of peasants and herders for encroaching on pristine nature. In the first instance, the main policy “solution” is immigration restriction; in the second it is coercive conservation, the violent exclusion of local communities from nature preserves. Both varieties of the greening of hate are about policing borders. By stressing the negative role of population growth, both target poor women’s fertility as a fundamental root of environmental

evil. And both divert attention from the real forces destroying the environment.

In the U.S. the first big greening of hate wave occurred in the mid-1990s when conservative anti-immigrant forces began mobilizing within the Sierra Club, the nation’s largest membership-based environmental organization, to pass a ballot initiative supporting a “reduction of net immigration” as a component of a “comprehensive population policy for the United States.” An opposing coalition of environmental justice, immigrant rights, and reproductive rights advocates successfully challenged the initiative, and it was voted down in 1998.<sup>1</sup>

Anti-immigrant forces kept on organizing, however. Today, three out of fifteen members of the Sierra Club Board of Directors are key players in the anti-immigrant lobby which is pushing for another ballot initiative in 2005. They are Ben Zuckerman, a UCLA astronomy professor, board member of the Sea Shepherd Conservation Society and a leader of the 1998 ballot initiative; Captain Paul Watson, a founding member of the Greenpeace Foundation and Sea Shepherd; and Doug LaFollette, Wisconsin Secretary of State and board member of Friends of the Earth. All three are conservationists – but what exactly do they want to conserve?

One does not have to scratch very far beneath the surface to find the links between the green wing of the anti-immigration movement and nativism and white supremacy. The summer 2002 issue of the Southern Poverty Law Center’s (SPLC) investigative magazine *Intelligence Report* documented these connections, focusing in particular on John Tanton, the main organizer and funder of the anti-immigrant movement. His network has close ties to a number of racist hate groups, including the Council of Conservative Citizens.<sup>2</sup> Ben Zuckerman has described Tanton as “a great environmentalist.” Concerned about growing anti-immigration

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momentum in the Sierra Club, Mark Potok of the SPLC wrote the Club's President in October 2003 warning of "a hostile takeover attempt by forces allied with Tanton and a variety of right-wing extremists."<sup>3</sup> At this point, one of the main right-wing strategies is to get anti-immigration activists to join the Club en masse. Fortunately, progressive Sierra Club members, as well as 13 past Club presidents, are fighting back.<sup>4</sup>

Meanwhile, overseas certain international conservation agencies, notably Conservation International (CI), are greening hate through supporting the militarization of nature preservation.<sup>5</sup> Coercive conservation measures, of course, are nothing new. From colonial times onwards, wildlife conservation efforts have often involved the violent exclusion of local people from their land by game rangers drawn from the ranks of the police, military and prison guards. To legitimize this exclusion, government officials, conservation agencies and aid donors have frequently invoked narratives of expanding human populations destroying pristine landscapes, obscuring the role of resource extraction by state and corporate interests.<sup>6</sup>

Today, one of the most well-known cases of coercive conservation is CI's involvement in the Lacandon Forest in Chiapas, Mexico. In an interview with the *Houston Chronicle*, CI's Chiapas director blamed deforestation there on overpopulation: "It's obvious that the main problem is overpopulation. The children of the farmers don't have any land. They can't all be peasants."<sup>7</sup> With USAID assistance, CI and the World Wildlife Fund are promoting a conservation campaign in the region focused on identifying illegal settlements — often Zapatista communities — which are then forcibly removed.<sup>8</sup> These efforts are complemented by the government's aggressive female sterilization campaign in the region. CI's close ties to bio-prospecting corporations raise questions of just who the forest is being preserved for.

Increasingly, international conservation agencies like CI are embarking on what are

called "joint population-environment projects" which involve collaborations between family planning and conservation NGOs. Despite a professed commitment to communities identifying their own health and environmental needs, the main priority of many such projects is to reduce population growth through increased uptake of contraception. Ideologically, the projects reinforce the message that it is population growth and the practices of the local people themselves that cause environmental degradation. This is not to argue against the provision of family planning services, but they better serve women when they are part of broader health care and are designed to meet women's genuine need for safe birth control rather than population control objectives.<sup>9</sup>

Population-environment projects often use population monitoring systems, not only to register births, but to track migration. Potentially, such tracking could be of use to defense and intelligence interests, especially in areas of political conflict. A proposed monitoring system for the World Wildlife Fund in the Calakmul Biosphere Reserve in Mexico, where many refugees from Chiapas have settled in recent years, would select key informant households in "sentinel" communities to track in-migration. Recruiting households as informants raises disturbing concerns about the impact and intent of such monitoring.<sup>10</sup>

Indeed, coercive conservation provides an important means by which militaries can expand their reach. For example, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) now has biodiversity and conservation projects in 15 countries in Africa. In Malawi, for example, it has facilitated the equipping of park guards with semi-automatic weapons. In Central America, the DOD and Southern Command are working to involve national militaries in the MesoAmerican Biological Corridor project, and in the Philippines U.S. environmental aid is a component of current anti-terrorism efforts. Within the U.S., meanwhile, the DOD is now billing itself as the preserver of biodiversity through its "stewardship" of vast tracks of land it controls for military testing and training. "Biodiversity helps us achieve military readiness in harmony with nature," claims DOD environmental security official Sherri W. Goodman.<sup>11</sup>

The greening of hate has been able to take root in U.S. environmentalism because it draws on widely shared popular beliefs regarding the relationship between population, conservation and the environment. These are the myths of man versus nature, the wilderness ethic, the degradation narrative, and scarcity.

**Man versus Nature:** Because Americans live in such a rapacious and parochial capitalist society, many assume that people are *de facto* bad for the environment. There is little understanding of the ways in which human agency can shape the environment in positive ways and even improve biodiversity. There is a big difference, for example, between a corporate farm in the Midwest which uses massive applications of herbicides and pesticides and a peasant corn plot in Mexico where new seed varieties are constantly evolving over

time and other species of plants and animals can thrive in the non-polluted environment. Similarly, there is a big difference between a city with a strong zoning department, environmental regulations and a well-developed public transport system and one in which business prerogatives and an unregulated real estate market shape development and encourage urban sprawl. Political and technological choices, not levels of immigration, make the difference between the ecologically healthy city and the unhealthy one.

The man vs. nature myth is rooted in a problematic tradition of conservation biology which views human populations as behaving in the same way as exponentially growing pondweed or bacteria in a petri dish. In the U.S. major environmental figures like Paul Ehrlich of population bomb fame and Garrett Hardin, who advocates pushing the poor off the lifeboat, come from this tradition. It not only ignores the capacity of humans for rational thought and action, but history, politics, economics, and demography. For example, little attention is paid to the fact that birth rates are now declining around the world at a faster rate than was anticipated due to a range of social and economic factors, including mass education and urbanization.

This negative view of humanity is a particularly insidious ideological trap because it leads to an acceptance of wars and diseases like AIDS as “natural” checks on human population growth. The website of the anti-immigrant group, Support a Comprehensive Sierra Club Population Policy (SUSPS), currently features two stories about “My Bacteria Neighbors” and the “Lily Pond Parable.” Use your imagination to fill in the blanks.<sup>12</sup>

**The Wilderness Ethic:** William Cronin has described the unique place the idea of wilderness holds in the American psyche, both as a romantic, sublime, quasi-religious force and a vehicle for frontier nostalgia. The ways in which wilderness is constructed have a number of problematic outcomes. The ahistorical myth of wilderness as

“virgin” land obscures the systematic forced migration and genocide of its original Native American inhabitants. By locating nature in the far-off wild, it allows people to evade responsibility for environmental protection closer to their homes. And it is geographically parochial, blinding many Americans to the complex ways in which people relate to the land in other countries and cultures.<sup>13</sup> Critiquing the wilderness ethic does not mean one is opposed to national parks and nature protection – rather, it calls for equitable and democratic processes to ensure local communities also benefit from conservation measures and are not pushed off their lands and robbed of their livelihoods.

**The Degradation Narrative:** This is the belief that population pressure-induced poverty makes Third World peasants degrade their environments by over-farming marginal lands. The ensuing soil depletion and desertification then lead them to migrate elsewhere as “environmental refugees,” either to ecologically vulnerable rural areas where the vicious cycle is once again set in motion or to cities where they become a primary source of political instability. The degradation narrative has proved particularly popular in Western policy circles because it kills a number of birds with one stone: it blames poverty on population pressure, and not, for example, on lack of land reform or off-farm employment opportunities; it blames peasants for land degradation, obscuring the role of commercial agriculture and extractive industries; and it targets migration both as an environmental and security threat. It is a way of homogenizing all rural people in the Global South into one big destructive force, reinforcing simplistic Us vs. Them, West vs. the Rest dichotomies.<sup>14</sup>

**The Myth of Scarcity:** Last but not least is the myth of scarcity – the belief, common in the U.S., that there are not enough resources to go around and the human population is close to overshooting the carrying capacity of the earth. There is a certain irony in the fact that the country with the most profligate waste and consumption levels is the most obsessed with planetary resource limits (and the least willing to do anything about them). Andrew Ross makes the point that fears about scarcities of natural resources parallel the manufacturing of social scarcities by competitive capitalist regimes. In the public consciousness, imposed limits to growth in social welfare expenditures become intertwined with the notion of environmental limits.<sup>15</sup> Missing from the picture, of course, is the role of the rich in gobbling up both economic and natural resources at an ever expanding rate, undermining effective environmental protection, and refusing to invest in renewable, non-polluting energy sources.

We must challenge these myths if we are going to effectively resist the greening of hate and build an effective environmentalism which both protects nature and promotes social justice.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> See China Brotsky, "A Defeat for the Greening of Hate," *Political Environments*, No. 6, Fall 1998.

<sup>2</sup> "The Puppeteer," *Intelligence Report*, no. 106, Summer 2002, 44-51.

<sup>3</sup> Letter to Larry Fahn, President of the Sierra Club, from Mark Potok, October 21, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> On resistance from presidents, see [www.groundswellsierra.org](http://www.groundswellsierra.org), and for progressive response, contact [sierrans4rights@comcast.net](mailto:sierrans4rights@comcast.net).

<sup>5</sup> Aziz Choudry, "Tarzan, Indiana Jones and Conservation International's Global Greenwash Machine," *Znet*, October 16, 2003, [www.zmag.org](http://www.zmag.org).

<sup>6</sup> Roderick P. Neumann, "Disciplining Peasants in Tanzania: From State Violence to Self-Surveillance in Wildlife Conservation," in N.L. Peluso and M. Watts, *Violent Environments*, Cornell University Press, 2001, 305-327; and Lee Alexander Risby et al, "Environmental Narratives in Protected Park Planning: The Case of Queen Elizabeth National Park, Uganda," *Policy Matters* (IUCN), No. 10, August 2002, 40-49.

<sup>7</sup> Dudley Althaus, "The Fated Forest," *Houston Chronicle*, [www.chron.com/content/chronicle/special/01/forest/index.html](http://www.chron.com/content/chronicle/special/01/forest/index.html).

<sup>8</sup> See Matthew MacLean, "Mexico's Government Wants to Relocate Illegal Squatters, but Some Threaten Violence," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 16, 2003.

<sup>9</sup> For example, see Denise Caudhill, "Exploring Capacity for Integration: University of Michigan Population-Environment Fellows Program's Impact Assessment Project," in *Environmental Change and Security Project Report*. No. 6, 2000, 66-76.

<sup>10</sup> Richard E. Bilsborrow, "Migration, Population Change and the Rural Environment," in *Environmental Change and Security Project Report*, No. 8, 69-94.

<sup>11</sup> See Elizabeth Hartmann, *Strategic Scarcity: The Origins and Impact of Environmental Conflict Ideas*, PhD Thesis, Development Studies, London School of Economics, 2003. Goodman quote from Department of Defense, *DoD Commander's Guide to Biodiversity*, n.d.

<sup>12</sup> [www.susps.org](http://www.susps.org)

<sup>13</sup> William Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature," in Cronon, ed., *Uncommon Ground*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1995.

<sup>14</sup> Betsy Hartmann, "Degradation Narratives: Over-Simplifying the Link Between Population, Poverty and the Environment," *IHDP Update*, Newsletter of the International Human Dimensions Program on Global Environmental Change, No. 4, 2002, 6-8.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Ross, "The Lonely Hour of Scarcity," *Capitalism, Nature and Socialism*, 7(3:3 - 26), 1996.