

# **Immigrants Aren't the Problem. We Are.**

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Bill McKibben is the author of "The End of Nature" and the forthcoming "Maybe One: A Personal and Environmental Argument for Single-Child Families."

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## **Body**

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In the next few weeks, the half million members of the Sierra Club will vote to set the club's policy on the issue of immigration. Since the Sierra Club does not exactly control Congress, the final count won't much matter, but the debate, which has already been spirited, represents an invaluable chance to raise the issue of how many people this country can and should contain.

Immigration is about as difficult a moral subject as one can imagine, so even the proposed change in Sierra Club policy -- in favor of an unspecified "reduction in net immigration" -- has ignited controversy. In a world of desperate poverty, it is hard for citizens of the richest nation to argue that the door should be closed, especially since nearly all of us can recall our immigrant roots.

Not only that, too many people who support tighter controls on immigration are racists of various types. I got a letter last month from a board member of one national group working on population issues in which he complained about "barbarians" who littered the subways and played "ugly" music. (He professed to prefer that all-American composer J. S. Bach.) So it is no surprise that most wise people, including most wise environmentalists, simply ignore the matter: currently, the official Sierra Club policy is to "take no position on immigration levels or on policies governing immigration into the United States."

Environmentalists have focused on living more simply and more efficiently as the keys to our problems here at home, but many, myself included, have largely overlooked the messier and more divisive question of our sheer numbers. While our birth rate is just below the replacement level of 2.1 -- the number of children each mother would need to bear to keep the population constant -- our total population continues to grow quickly compared with that of other developed nations. Part of this is because of our longer life spans and the echoes of the baby-boom bulge -- even at two children apiece, we'll be increasing our numbers for decades to come. But our population is also growing because we have by far the world's highest level of immigration -- something like 800,000 legal immigrants take up residence here each year (not to mention illegal immigrants, estimated at 300,000 a year). Natural increase and immigration, the Census Bureau projects, may combine to swell our population by as much as

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50 percent in the next 50 years, bringing it to nearly 400 million; by even the most conservative estimates, there will be 30 percent more Americans by the middle of the next century.

That's a problem for two reasons. The first, and most obvious, is that this country, so seemingly empty when Europeans initially arrived, is by some definitions becoming crowded. It's true that the Plains remain sparsely populated, and probably always will. But the places Americans want to live are jammed. The Northeast corridor of suburbs and cities is already more densely populated than Haiti or El Salvador; California's 30 million may become 50 million by 2050. With each year, the ring of suburbs spreads a little farther out, the roads become a bit more crowded, the margin for wildlife becomes slightly smaller. That endless growth places real stress on our supplies of everything from water to silence, from farmland to solitude. Such growth even strains our democracy. When the Constitution was ratified, each member of Congress represented 30,000 voters; now it's 570,000.

But there's a bigger problem still. Americans, as the world's most voracious consumers, contribute far more per capita to the world's environmental problems than anyone else. So an extra hundred million Americans means, for instance, a staggering amount of carbon dioxide entering the atmosphere and warming the climate. It's true that we could alleviate some of that problem if each of us consumed less and consumed more efficiently -- if we lived in smaller homes heated by the sun. I've spent most of my career writing about just such ideas, and believe in them wholeheartedly.

But at the moment, we're building bigger homes and driving bigger cars. And even if we came to our senses, the momentum of natural increase and immigration would render most of our changes meaningless. As the President's Council on Sustainable Development pointed out in 1996, domestic population growth means we'll need to increase our energy efficiency 50 percent in the next half century just to run in place.

This is a very different argument from the traditional "they'll-take-our-jobs-from-us" lament. Economists by now have mostly concluded that immigrants actually create wealth, which should come as no surprise to anyone who has visited Brooklyn or Queens in recent years. If those who wanted to immigrate here stayed instead in Juarez or Shanghai or, for that matter, Dublin, they would do far less damage to the planet precisely because they would not be as rich. That's the point, and that's also the rub. People want to come here for a better life with more opportunities, and who are we to deny them that chance?

We of course already deny plenty of people that chance -- even our current, historically generous immigration ceiling means many people aren't allowed in. Of the world's huddled masses, only the tiniest fraction will ever come here even with existing laws. And while some population-control advocates want to see immigration all but stopped, most whom I've talked to would prefer to see the limits cut roughly in half, to about 400,000 annually, with special provisions for asylum seekers. At that rate, if our birth rate simultaneously fell to the European average of 1.5 children, we could see our population stop growing within a generation.

Still, such a policy would be harsh. It would mean 400,000 more people a year who would be turned away at the door -- people with particular hopes, particular sorrows. And all in the name of as-yet fairly abstract problems like global warming. Such restrictions would come at real cost to the American dream, too; in most cities I know, New York included, immigrants best exemplify the kind of citizenship and community spirit increasingly absent from the nation's mainstream.

So I think we have no right to pass such laws, or even to support them in nonbinding forms like Sierra Club referendums, unless we also take serious steps in our own lives to lessen our impact on the environment. If we're not willing to reduce the size of our families or the size of our sport utility vehicles, then cutting immigration is piggish scapegoating; it may save some of our landscape, but at the price of our national soul. If, however, we are willing to take some painful steps ourselves, then we earn the right to tell some tough truths to others -- chief among them that even this rich land can't grow forever. Numbers count.

## Graphic

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Drawing

## Classification

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