Presentation to Sierra Club Population Committee

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[NOTE by Tim Murray, British Columbia, January 2019: This address was presented to the entire National Committee of the Sierra Club at a time when a Sierra Club ballot initiative promoted by Sierrans for U.S. Population Stabilization was gaining steam.* After drawing a broad picture of population problems worldwide Speidel made some very specific comments about US population and immigration issues: *"I would now like to turn to some controversial areas which must be addressed..... **What approach to the migration issue is appropriate? Ignoring the issue is intellectually dishonest - it is a real issue and should be addressed**... I would suggest giving close attention to the conclusions of the US Commission on Immigration Reform, which called for strengthening services and support for immigrants but limiting their total numbers. Perhaps it is worth noting that the US Congress did exactly the opposite - limiting benefits to immigrants but imposing no new constraint on numbers."*

Later I called him as a courtesy asking permission to quote him directly. He said he would like to look again at his talk and make a few changes. Since his remarks were handed out as a paper I had no reason to believe he would not be accommodating. Yet I heard nothing. I called again. This time he acknowledged he was "pushing the envelope" and that he would have to "run this by his board." I never heard from him again. Speidel is currently Professor, Department of Obstetrics, Gynecology & Reproductive Sciences, and Director Emeritus and Senior Scholar, Bixby Center for Global Reproductive Health at the University of California, San Francisco. *Elbel, F., D. Schneider, W.G. Elder & S.H. Hurlbert (2019) How Sierrans for U.S. Population Stabilization (SUSPS) Advised Congress in 2001. The Social Contract 29 (2): 6-16; Meyerson, F.A.B. (2004) Immigration, Population Policy, and the Sierra Club. Population and Environment 26(1): 61-69.]

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I am pleased and honored to be joining you this evening; I would like to briefly address a number of questions including: What should our goals be? How does population relate to these goals? What is holding us back?, and What do we need to do now?

First a few words on what I believe our shared goals should be. I would suggest just two broad objectives. First, the preservation of nature, and second, the improvement of human well-being. **Of course it is an expression of values to say that nonhuman living things, be they insects or redwoods, have an intrinsic right to survive, and some would say to flourish, as do the inanimate forms of nature, be they rivers or deserts. Even if this argument is given little weight compared to the goal of sustaining and improving human wellbeing, both for aesthetic and more practical reasons the natural ecosystems upon which all humans depend for survival must be preserved.**

So how does population relate to these goals?

Lack of access to good quality family planning and related rapid population growth are among the most serious problems facing the world today. There are four general reasons why access to family planning is important:

First, the ability to plan the timing and number of children born is a basic human right. Currently about 250 million people in developing countries are unable to exercise this right because they lack access to adequate family planning information and services.

Second, family planning is essential to good health. In developing countries, over half of treatable or preventable diseases among women age 15-44 relate to reproduction, with the largest share caused by risks associated with pregnancy and childbirth, closely followed by sexually transmitted diseases. Family planning itself has a powerful beneficial impact on reproductive health.

Third, rapid population growth hampers social and economic development. It makes improvement in educational and health status, access to jobs and many other aspects of social and economic progress more difficult in poor countries and, in the case of some sub Saharan African countries, virtually impossible.

Fourth, preservation of the natural biological systems—the land, water and atmosphere which support all life—is threatened by their over exploitation, a phenomenon related to unprecedented growth in human consumption and human numbers in all countries in the world during the last half century. Burgeoning human numbers are an important source of pressure on natural resources and the environment. Some 10,000 years ago there were only about 5 million people on earth. At that time, because human numbers were so few and the technology for exploitation of natural resources so limited, most biological systems – the forests, grasslands, wildlife, soils, water, plants, and microorganisms – were not seriously damaged. Renewable resources were not threatened.: The situation today is different. In country after country, the natural resource base is shrinking while the pressures on it, fueled by increased consumption and population growth, are increasing rapidly.

The impact of humans on their environment is related to population size, the per capita consumption of each person, and the environmental damage caused by the technology used to produce what is consumed. A review of the status of the life-supporting biosystems on the planet is alarming. The human species is coopting an ever larger share of these biosystems and their exploitation is occurring so rapidly that it cannot be sustained. We are draining our biological bank account in what may prove to be a onetime splurge.

The world faces an environmental dilemma. The enormous scale of present use of natural resources and production of waste does not appear to be sustainable. Yet somehow the planet's life supporting natural systems must soon accommodate at least three billion and more likely four billion more people and support desperately needed advances in living standards for the three quarters of the world's population living in poverty.

A decade ago, the former head of the World Bank, Robert McNamara, estimated that of the 4 billion people in poor countries, 1 billion people lived in “absolute poverty.” They exist...”on the margin of life. Their lives are so characterized by malnutrition, illiteracy, and disease as to be beneath any reasonable definition of human dignity.” According to McNamara, to bring up the standard of living for this deprived group and to provide a modest 2% growth in incomes and consumption per capita for the rest of the world's people would require doubling consumption every 35 years, or an eightfold increase by the end of the 21st century. This increased consumption, on top of a projected 160% increase in human population, would require economic production to increase 20-fold. Even if this figure is just tenfold it presents a daunting challenge.

Certainly human ingenuity can help reduce the environmental damage of production through use of new technologies that are more energy efficient, generate less waste, or require less consumption of natural resources. But these advances are likely to be difficult to achieve, to be unpredictable, and to require time. Furthermore, their broad application is likely to be enormously difficult and expensive especially compared to measures that help slow population growth.

Paradoxically, pressures on natural systems seem less severe in the case of nonrenewable resource, like metals, minerals, or petroleum. Although they may be expensive, substitutes can be found and recycling is possible. It is the “renewable” resources—air, land, and water—that are under the most pressure from population growth and human exploitation. Let me give you a few examples:

Population growth is putting untenable pressures on the productive capacity of cropland and the food supplies of an increasing share of the earth's population are at risk. One estimate is that already between 350 million and 1

billion people are malnourished. Overexploitation of fragile arid and semiarid lands and the overuse of land subject to erosion are becoming ever more common in many parts of the world. It is estimated that every year 6 to 7 million hectares of agricultural lands are lost to erosion and an additional 1.5 million hectares are lost through water logging, salinization, or alkalization. This is the equivalent of rendering a land area about the size of the state of Maine useless to agriculture each year.

One estimate is that human activity has already transformed 10% of the earth's surface from forest or rangeland into desert. The United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) estimates that up to one-third of the world's land area, home to one fifth of the world's people, is threatened.

Human health and agriculture are also at risk as fresh water supplies for farming and drinking become increasingly scarce and polluted. Proper treatment of human waste is not available for about 2.5 billion people or over half of the people living in developing countries and 2 billion people lack access to clean drinking water. Pollution by sewage contributes to waterborne diseases including typhoid, hepatitis, cholera, amebiasis, and other diarrheal diseases. Because of population growth, the number of people living in countries in which renewable water is a scarce resource will increase from 131 million in 1990 to an estimated 750 to 900 million by the year 2025.

Recent rates of population growth are unprecedented: they represent a veritable demographic revolution. Someone born in 1930 when there were 2 billion people on the planet will live to see the arrival on earth of the 3rd, 4th, 5th, 6th, and possibly the 7th billion in their lifetime. Over the last 10 years, the developing countries grew by about 850 million people, a number almost as large as the combined population of Africa and Latin America a decade ago.

What population growth can we expect in the future?

In 1997, the growth rate for the 1.2 billion people in developed countries was estimated to be 0.1 percent per year implying a doubling time of 564 years. This is good news. The annual growth rate for the 4.7 billion people living in poor countries was estimated to be 1.8 percent a year, implying a doubling of just 38 years. This is bad news.

The UN has recently revised population projections slightly downward but this good news has been seized upon by conservative observers such as Ben Wattenberg and a somewhat naive media to project misleading messages about impending population decline or implosion. The alleged scenario is that there is no more population problem, and the wealthy low fertility countries will sink into decline under the weight of burdensome legions of the elderly.

A close look at the UN projections suggests we are far from solving the global population crisis. The UN has presented three different estimates of future population growth. The high fertility model envisions a TFR or total fertility rate (the lifetime births per woman) falling from the current 3.0 to 2.6 in 2050 with a growing population of 11.2 billion, the medium projection suggests a TFR of 2.1, a population of 9.37 billion and the low projection envisions a TFR of 1.6 with a population of 7.66 billion in 2050 some 90 million below the peak of 7.75 billion in 2040.

The most likely projection is an increase of two billion people in the next 25 years (equaling the record breaking two billion increase over the past 25 years) and a growth of world population from today's 5.8 billion to over 10 billion by the year 2100.

In considering the most appropriate strategy to address population issues it is useful to consider the components of projected future population growth in developing countries. John Bongaarts, a well known population expert, has disaggregated the sources of future growth into three categories: high desired family size, i.e. over an average of two children, unwanted fertility, i.e. those who wish to delay or stop childbearing but who are not

using birth control, and "momentum" caused by the rapid growth in the number of couples of reproductive ages the result of very high fertility fifteen or more years ago.

The following table shows the relative share of each of these three components of projected population growth within developing countries. With a 1995 population of 4.5 billion in the developing world, without improved access to family planning information and services, these poor countries are likely to reach a population of 10.2 billion by the year 2100.

Projected Population Growth in Developing Countries (1995-2100)

Component of growth population	Growth between 1995 and 2100 (in billions)	Percent of component growth from each
Momentum	2.8	49 percent
Unwanted fertility	1.9	33 percent
High desired family size	1.0	18 percent
Total	5.7	100 percent

This analysis suggests that the social changes associated with demand for small families e.g. improvements in health, education, status of women, and living standards, while highly desirable for improving human welfare, are the least important to mitigating future population growth. Because most population experts initially came from the discipline of sociology, population scholarship has tended to **overemphasize the importance of social and cultural factors on fertility** [The Population Media Center and many other organizations would now disagree. – S. Hurlbert, 2019] and to underestimate the importance of programs that provide contraceptive information and services. However, continuing high desired family size remains important in some countries, particularly these in sub-Saharan Africa. While advances in the social sector therefore remain an important objective both for their intrinsic value and for their role in decreasing desire for large families, dealing with unwanted fertility and momentum can justifiably be the highest priorities of population programs.

From survey research we know there are 100 to 120 million women in developing countries who 'wish to limit their childbearing but are unable to plan the birth of their children, principally because they lack access to adequate family planning information and services. In some cases opposition of family members or fear of side effects from use of contraception may also pose important barriers as to use of contraception. Meeting their need, mainly by increasing availability and improving the quality of family planning services, would lower fertility from the current 3.4 child average halfway to the 2.1 child average needed for population stabilization.

To slow the "momentum" of population growth caused by childbearing at young ages among a rapidly growing number of couples of reproductive age (the result of high fertility a generation ago), programs to delay early childbearing among young people are essential. By the year 2000 there will be almost one billion teenagers, most of whom will live in developing countries and most of whom will become sexually active while teenagers.

To deal with population momentum, the most important single approach is to increase the age at first birth so that generation times are lengthened. In order to achieve this, sexuality education and family planning services for youth are urgently needed together with a change in social mores, which in many developing countries encourage early childbearing. And because many teenagers initiate sexual activity prior to use of contraception, abortion services are needed to deal with unwanted pregnancies (in the US about half of unintended teen pregnancies end in abortion). Services for youth, especially abortion services, are the most politically sensitive and the most neglected area of population work.

Overall, there is a substantial unmet demand for family planning among developing country couples. Although research can bring important refinements in program strategy, especially for programs for youth, there is general agreement on how to effectively deliver family planning information and services in developing country settings. Many success stories attest to this. For example, a completely voluntary national family planning program in Thailand helped reduce family size from an average of six children to about two over a remarkably brief seventeen-year time span, 1970-1987.

The most urgent need at present is to extend service programs into underserved areas in developing countries and improve the quality of existing services. Dr. Malcolm Potts, a Berkeley professor and leading population scholar has said, "What we need now are big boring programs."

The strategy which was agreed upon at the Cairo population conference in 1994 calls for making family planning and a limited array of reproductive health services universally available in developing countries by the year 2000 at an estimated cost of $17 billion annually. The conference recommended that donor countries collectively should provide one-third of the total, some $5.7 billion.

In response to these agreements, increased resources have been forthcoming from a number of developing countries – altogether they are now spending about $5 billion annually and are about 45 percent of the way to meeting the financial target of $11.3 billion. Donor nations, which currently provide about $1.1 billion of annual population assistance, have reached less than 20 percent of their goal of providing $5.7 billion by 2000.

Although the UN Population Fund and AID must turn down hundreds of millions of dollars worth of requests for population assistance each year, a conservative Congress has reduced U.S. population assistance from about $550 million per year in fiscal 1995 to an average of about $350 million per year in fiscal years 1996 and 1997 and $385 million in 1998. Increased donor assistance from several European nations has only partially made up for the loss of U.S. funds.

So what do we need to do now?

Use of modern contraceptives by couples in developing countries has increased from about 10% before 1965 to about 50% today. Between 1970 and 1995, fertility in poor countries declined from 6 children per woman to 3.5 today – nearly two-thirds of the distance to replacement level fertility in only 25 years – a single generation. This is a tremendous success story, one we can build on. Right now the main thing holding back population programs is lack of political will in both donor and developing countries and the resulting lack of funds to make family planning available.

Near term expansion of family planning services will need to be very rapid to keep up with increased numbers of prospective family planning clients. In the decade of the 1980s, the number of married women of reproductive age increased by 200 million. About 450 million couples in poor countries now use contraception services and an additional 235 million couples will need services over the next decade. That's an increase from current levels of over 50 percent. But so far the financial resources to make this possible are not available.

I would now like to turn to some controversial areas that must be addressed.

Reaching adolescents and young adults with family planning information and services is crucial. Of particular importance is the adoption of liberal policies recognizing both the information and service needs of young people even if they are unmarried.

Safe abortion services must be available. Worldwide there are about 50 million abortions each year, with about half occurring in developing countries. But because millions of women only have access to dangerous procedures to terminate unwanted pregnancies, there are estimated 75,000 abortion related deaths each year. Yet well-performed abortion carries little risk, it is five to 10 times safer than childbirth, and could virtually eliminate abortion related deaths. We must also recognize the fact that contraceptives frequently fail, perhaps 30

million times each year in the world, and that no country has reached low fertility without access to and extensive use of abortion.

Another controversial topic is migration. The U.S. population now about 268 million is predicted by the Census Bureau to reach 387 million by 2050, an increase of about 120 million in a little over 50 years. Migration of about 1 million per year (legal 820,000 and illegal 235,000) and the high fertility of the 23 million foreign born is fueling U.S. population growth, e.g. the lifetime fertility of women living in California who were born in Mexico is estimated to be 3.4 children, and the fertility of white native born Californian women is half that, 1.7 children. **According to a National Academy of Sciences study, if there were no migration to the US, the 2050 population would reach only 310 million**, if migration increased by 50 percent, the 2050 US population total would reach 426 million, and if migration were to double, the figure would be 463 million.

A typical pattern is the migration of working age populations from poor countries to rich countries. **Unfortunately it is difficult to fashion a "win-win" strategy for migrants and receiving countries**. Everyone denied entry to North America or Europe loses the chance to live in a rich country yet more population poses an environmental threat and maybe an economic burden on receiving countries. The impact of migrants to the U.S. is very unevenly distributed. About one third of migrants eventually reside in California where every native born family spends about $1,200 each year to support services for migrants to the state yet these same migrants may increase federal tax receipts.

What approach to the migration issue is appropriate? Ignoring the issue is intellectually dishonest – it is a real issue and should be addressed. It could be argued that in an ideal world we should have no borders but this is undoubtedly impractical. **I would suggest giving close attention to the conclusions of the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, which called for strengthening services and support for immigrants but limiting their total numbers. Perhaps it is worth noting that the US Congress did exactly the opposite limiting benefits to immigrants but imposing no new constraint on numbers.**

Long-term solutions should include foreign aid to support development in sending countries. Alleviation of poverty and increased economic opportunity at home will reduce the incentive to migrate. Unfortunately, the gap between rich and poor countries is growing. Between 1981 and 1990 the average per capita income in developed countries (with population growing relatively slowly at 0.5% a year), increased from $8,600 to $17,900. During the same period, the developing countries, growing four times as fast, experienced an insignificant gain in per capita income, from $700 to $810.

Population assistance to slow population growth in developing countries is also critical to jobs. Between 1975 and the year 2000, an estimated 800 million new jobs will be needed in developing countries to provide for the 40% of the labor force that is unemployed or underemployed and for population growth of 2 billion people. This is as many jobs as the total number now existing in the developed countries. Unfortunately world unemployment is now the highest since the depression.

I would now like to turn to the issue of political activism. For over thirty years, thanks to strong bipartisan U.S. government support, the U.S. has been a leader in assisting family planning programs in developing countries. With continuing gains in strength by religious political extremists and adoption of many of their anti-abortion and anti-family planning positions by the U.S. Congress elected in 1994, the climate of support for domestic and international family planning has changed dramatically for the worse.

Although the American public is pro-choice by a substantial majority and pro-family planning by an overwhelming margin, anti-abortion activists have increasingly targeted supporters of family planning. With the electoral clout of the Christian Coalition and other conservative groups made clear in recent elections, a shrinking share of Congress is willing to support family planning, especially as a component of the politically unpopular foreign aid program.

If the success of environmental protection efforts is dependent on constraining population growth, why do environmental organizations usually give the population issue low priority? Environmental scientists are very committed to dealing with population issues but the leadership of environmental advocacy organizations is often timid. The excuses I have heard include: "It's not our job," "It's too controversial," "We have Catholics on our Board," "We would lose members," and "We can't take on anything new." Of course addressing population issues does create risks for an organization. **But what is the point of avoiding controversy and failing in your mission?** Fortunately a number of environmental advocacy organizations are showing courage in addressing these controversial issues. They include Audubon, National Wildlife Federation, The Isaac Walton League, and the Sierra Club. The League of Conservation Voters, too, has refused to let Congress off the hook by insisting that votes on international population programs be included in their legislative score card.

So what more should the Sierra Club do?

If you believe as I do that population stabilization (or better yet decline) are critical to the preservation and restoration of life supporting ecosystems, the Club must address highly controversial issues. First and foremost you must support **domestic and** international population programs. But it is essential to go beyond this easy position. We must ensure the availability of family planning and abortion services for all who need them, including the young and unmarried. And well off countries must address the issue of immigration.

I would now like to turn to the question of how to make good political things happen.

First, coordination of political and legislative strategies is important. Many individuals and organizations advocating the same thing are more influential than a few.

Second, you must win the "hearts and minds" of several important audiences. They include legislators, print and electronic media, opinion shapers (for example, corporate, religious, and philanthropic leaders), and the general public.

Third, to be effective you must vary the approach to those you wish to influence. Voices from back home in the district or state get the most attention from members of Congress. The media needs news hooks—information that fits their definition of "news." Influential leaders are often responsive to personal contact from others they trust and editorial content of print media. Unfortunately this works against us in the case of the Wall Street Journal. And the general public needs constant repetition from many information sources.

I don't think we can save the environment without lessening population pressure – this should be everyone's job. Environmental scientists know this. It is time for the environmental advocacy organizations to put then considerable political clout to work on population.

The quality of life as we know it today hangs in the balance. A tripling of the world's population within the lifetime of today's children would almost inevitably convey to our grandchildren lives of heightened employment competition, resource scarcity, and environmental degradation. **And they will know, with near certainty, that our generation could have helped to spare them from such hardships, but failed to make the effort...Failed to invest a modest $3 per person per year in making responsible choice over childbearing an affordable reality for all of humanity.**