

The Living Earth Ethical Principles: A Family for All Families

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The fifth in a series of essays on a system of ecological ethics for living sustainably. This and the remaining essays describe the 10 Living Earth Ethical Principles in detail. For references and additional discussion, visit www.livingearthethics.org.

A Family for All Families. *Until the human population returns to a number that the Earth can healthily maintain, all couples should moderate their reproductive fruitfulness. Those wanting larger families should consider adopting as many children as they have the longing and means to raise. All families should focus on teaching their children to tread as lightly on the Earth as possible.*

We need to shrink the human population as fast as humanely possible if we expect the majority of humans to live in anything but the most abject state of poverty on a disrupted planet with ecosystem services increasingly less able to sustain humanity. But a reduction of how much, exactly? The conservatively calculated Ecological Footprint indicator suggests that the Earth can sustain about 2.1 billion high-income individuals *or* 6.2 billion middle-income individuals *or* 13.6 billion low-income individuals (this assumes all of Earth's biocapacity is used for humans). Few will be willing to return to a state of poverty, nor should they, so really we need to aim for either a high-income ("consumer") population one-third of today's population (and no one else), or, more realistically, a larger but still much-reduced middle-income population—one that maintains a simple but satisfying way of life.

So, the Earth can sustain 6 billion mindful individuals or fewer consumers—yet we're en route to a total population of about 9 billion, including 2–4 billion consumers. That means our survival depends on an aggressive campaign to reduce population *and* consumption, starting right now. In part we can address this by offering opportunities to women to control their own reproductive choices. Many have written about this, including Worldwatch vice president Robert Engelman in his recent book *More: Population, Nature, and What Women Want*. In essence, he notes, "women aren't seeking more children, but more *for* their children." If we can provide education, support, and access to contraception, many women will choose to have fewer children.

Family planning efforts like the ones Engelman describes

will help significantly, but they typically only focus on low and middle-income individuals. What about those women who are seeking more children in consumer countries, where each child has the impact of many children in low-income countries? The goal here also needs to be to encourage moderation in fruitfulness. Successful population management will most likely require not only good access to family planning but a new reproductive norm—that bearing one, or at most two, children is the very best choice—whether through ecological education efforts, social marketing campaigns, or religious teachings.

The trend seems to be going in the other direction, at least in the United States, where families are having two, three, four, even 18 children in the case of Jim Bob and Michelle Duggar, a reproductively energetic family prominently showcased on the Discovery Health Channel. Yet what few U.S. or other consumer-class citizens fully understand is that even their smaller families consume staggering amounts of resources and thus have a hugely disproportionate impact. The average U.S. family has 2.1 children, yet from a global resource perspective each of these children uses the resources of 9.4 children in a low-income country. In other words, the average U.S. family has about the equivalent of 20 children (while the Duggars have 169). So the problem is more to be found in rich countries than in poor countries where families are having just three to five children.

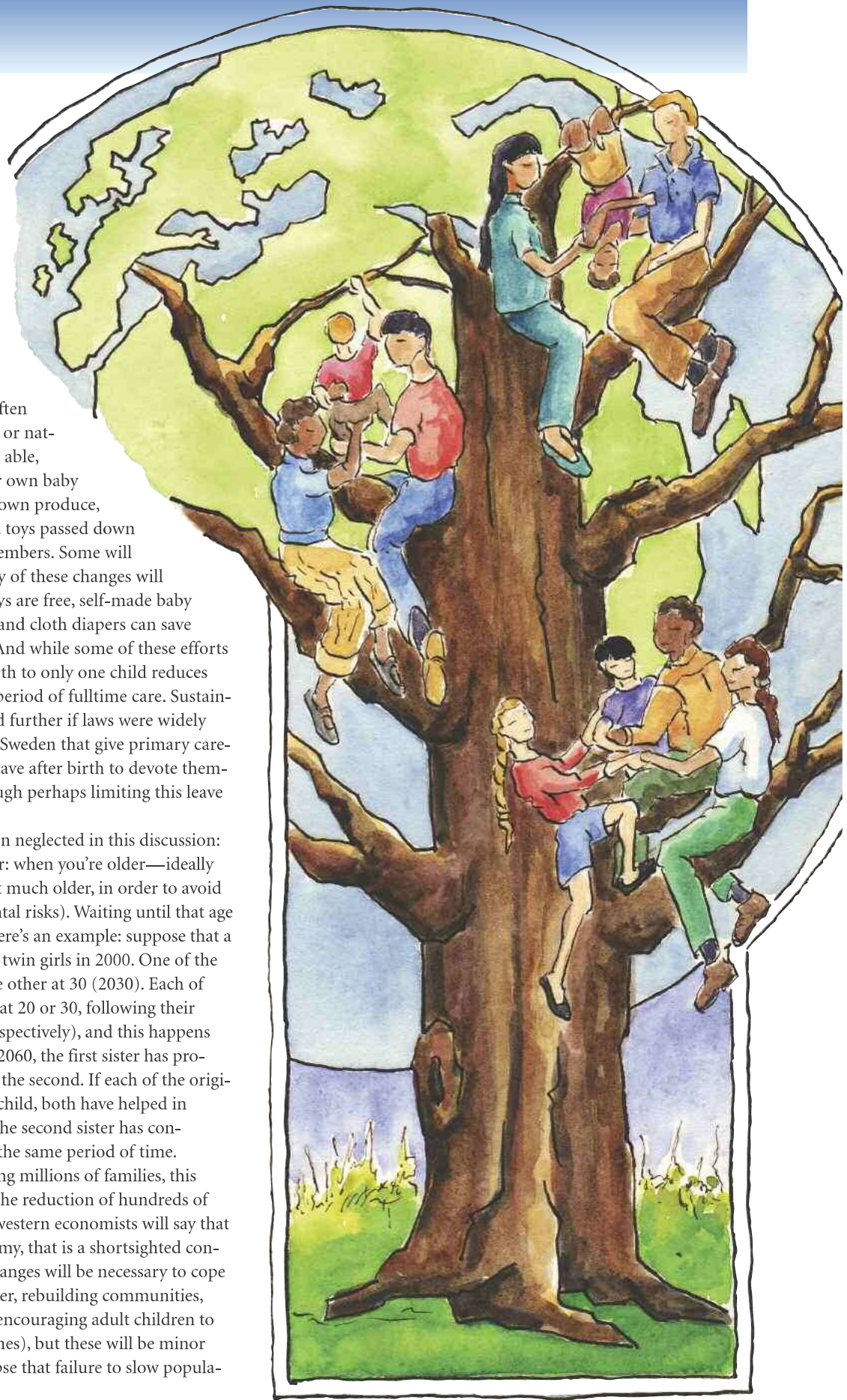
While few people will be willing to forego children altogether, anyone truly committed to global justice, the environment, sustainability, ethical living, stewardship of God's creation—however one personally frames today's converging social and ecological crises—must choose fewer children. A one-child goal, adopted as a personal choice and reinforced through tax incentives and the intentional cultivation of a new social norm, may be the best solution until population and consumption habits regain balance with the planet's longterm capacities.

But isn't it true that "only" children turn out to be spoiled brats? Writer Bill McKibben investigated this question in his book *Maybe One: A Case for Smaller Families* and found that single children were smarter, better motivated, and better adjusted than children with siblings. But if you don't want to believe the research or you just want a big family, simply adopt more children—ideally kids who would have grown up in consumer families whom you can raise sustainably instead.

Along with choosing the number of children, parents have

an important role to play both in the values they instill and how they raise their children. By teaching ecological values early—through the stories, lessons, and activities they share—parents can help their children internalize these values, slowing down acculturation into consumerism and helping to create a new and lasting cultural norm. Parents can raise their children sustainably often by choosing the most traditional or natural options: breastfeeding when able, using cloth diapers, making their own baby food from organic and locally grown produce, reusing second-hand clothes and toys passed down from older friends and family members. Some will think this is unrealistic, but many of these changes will save money (used clothes and toys are free, self-made baby foods are cheaper and healthier, and cloth diapers can save thousands of dollars per child). And while some of these efforts take time or add work, giving birth to only one child reduces the workload and the necessary period of fulltime care. Sustainable childcare could be promoted further if laws were widely adopted like those in Norway or Sweden that give primary caregivers 10 or 15 months of paid leave after birth to devote themselves fulltime to child care (though perhaps limiting this leave to just the first child).

Finally, one last question often neglected in this discussion: *When to have a child?* The answer: when you're older—ideally around the age of 30 (though not much older, in order to avoid increased health and developmental risks). Waiting until that age helps slow population growth. Here's an example: suppose that a 20-year-old woman gave birth to twin girls in 2000. One of the twins has a child at 20 (2020), the other at 30 (2030). Each of their children has one child each at 20 or 30, following their mothers' leads (2040 and 2060 respectively), and this happens once again in 2060 and 2090. By 2060, the first sister has produced one more generation than the second. If each of the original twins gives birth to only one child, both have helped in slowing population growth, but the second sister has contributed a third less growth over the same period of time. Assuming this is happening among millions of families, this demographic shift could lead to the reduction of hundreds of thousands of people. And while western economists will say that this will disrupt the global economy, that is a shortsighted concern. Yes, social and economic changes will be necessary to cope with the shift (such as retiring later, rebuilding communities, altering migration patterns, and encouraging adult children to bring parents back into their homes), but these will be minor compared to the ecological collapse that failure to slow population growth will bring.



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