Population and Environment Linkages: A U.S. Government Perspective

Margaret Pollack
Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, U.S. Department of State

NOTE: The following is a transcript of Margaret Pollack’s remarks at the Experts’ Meeting on the Impact of Human Population on Freshwater Resources, hosted by the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies, March 22-23, 2001.

I am delighted to be here with you today. I want to thank the co-sponsors of this workshop – the National Wildlife Federation, the Center for Environment and Population, and the Population Resource Council – three dynamic groups doing good work around the world, as well as our host, the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies.

But what really makes me the most delighted about being with you today is that all of you are what I sometimes fear is becoming an endangered species. Each and every one of you – by agreeing to participate in this workshop – is clearly interested in American foreign policy. You understand that, more and more, events overseas will have an impact here at home, on our security, our jobs, and our environment.

The U.S. government’s emphasis on family planning as an important public health intervention goes back more than 30 years. It arose at a time of rising concern about the environment, poverty alleviation, and the women’s movement. Today, our international population policy is based on the premise that achieving a healthy and sustainable world population is vital to U.S. foreign policy interests. It is an important element of our broader comprehensive strategy for sustainable development, which integrates our goal of achieving a healthy and sustainable world population with those of protecting the environment, building democracy, and encouraging broad-based economic growth. Our commitment is not rhetorical and is longstanding.

Every day each one of us shares the Earth and its resources with 214,000 more people than the day before. We add the equivalent of a San Francisco every week and a Mexico every year – with 95% of that growth occurring in the developing world. In country after country, the natural resources base is shrinking while the pressures upon it – fueled by increasing consumption and population growth – are increasing.

Per capita supplies of fresh water are a third lower than in 1970. Already, 80 countries with 40% of the world’s population suffer from water shortages at some time during the year and at least 300 million people live in regions with severe water shortages. By 2025, that number could be 3 billion.

Human activities have destroyed 11% of the globe’s arable land – an area the size of China and India combined. The loss of land and soils stretches...
the world’s ability to provide food in support of today’s population. Every year, because of population growth and environmental degradation, the world’s farmers must feed 78 million more people with 27 billion fewer tons of topsoil.

Each year, some 40 million acres of tropical forest disappear, an area about the size of Washington State, as trees are cleared for cropland, human settlements, and fuel wood. The destruction and fragmentation of forests and other wildlands are leading to the extinction of plant species which could lead to new food sources and cures for cancer and other diseases. Experts estimate that 27,000 plant or animal species are disappearing each year.

Official U.S. foreign assistance is focused on reducing the pressures of a growing population on the environment. Through our international environmental assistance, the U.S. government is supporting programs to improve the management of more than 2.5 million acres of tropical forests, coral reefs, and grasslands. We are expanding access to potable water, sewage treatment, and housing for more than a half million low-income families annually. And we are promoting the adoption of cleaner production and manufacturing processes in such countries as Ecuador, Egypt, and Indonesia, as well as promoting water conservation in several countries in Central America and the Middle East.

In addition, with U.S. international population assistance funds, we are supporting a number of special projects to connect population and environment issues. For example, in Honduras, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is funding an interactive tool called a “Farm Management Plan,” which is used by rural families to better manage natural resources. This tool, in turn, has inspired a parallel interactive booklet entitled the “Family Management Plan.” This booklet is used by rural couples to reflect on their desired family size, and the timing and spacing of their children in relation to their available resources. The men have become more receptive to learning about family planning in the context of agricultural management and the women now have the family planning information and services they desire.

In Madagascar, USAID’s Environmental Health Project combines natural resources management with improved health care. Family planning services, sustainable agriculture, increased food security, and environmental conservation are directly linked by cross-training service providers in these areas.

Through the University of Michigan Population and Environment Fellows, USAID also helps facilitate natural resource and family planning linkages in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. A specific example of this work can be found in Mexico’s Yucatan Peninsula, where the Fellows, working with local groups, found that providing reproductive health care as an entry point for environment-related activities involving women in community conservation efforts also led to a more open discussion of family planning needs.
The U.S. government effort towards the goal of achieving a healthy and sustainable world population – much of which we do through our environmental and international population assistance efforts – is promoting environmentally sustainable economic development in other countries. We have a profound interest in safe, voluntary family planning, a moral interest in saving human lives, and a practical interest in building strong families and environmentally sound communities.

Advocacy on population and environment issues is required by all of us, at all levels, to ensure the resources necessary to implement programs that protect women’s health, save children’s lives, and secure our plant’s environment. As we look to future, we will want to continue to focus our international assistance activities on ways in which all nations can advance in three pillars of sustainable development: economic growth, social development, and environmental protection.

MARGARET POLLACK is Director of the Office of Population in the Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration in the U.S. Department of State. Previously, Ms Pollack worked for six years in the State Department’s Bureau of International Organization Affairs (IO), where she was responsible for UN development and humanitarian issues. While in IO, Ms. Pollack was instrumental in negotiating the creation of the Joint UN Program on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS). Ms. Pollack was a member of the U.S. delegations to both the UN International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) held in Cairo in September 1994 and the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in September 1995. She was also the U.S. lead negotiator for the five-year review of the implementation of the ICPD Program of Action held at the UN in 1999. Ms. Pollack received a B.A. from Pomona College in 1978 and an M.A. in international affairs from The George Washington University in 1985.

Margaret Pollack, Director, Office of Population, Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration, L-505, SA-1, U.S. Department of State, Washington, DC 20522-0105. m.pollack@state.gov