

Summer 2003

Book Review: The Crowded Greenhouse: Population, Climate Change, and Creating a Sustainable World

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Recommended Citation

Chalecki, Elizabeth L., "Book Review: The Crowded Greenhouse: Population, Climate Change, and Creating a Sustainable World" (2003). *Political Science Faculty Publications*. 32.
<https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/poliscifacpub/32>

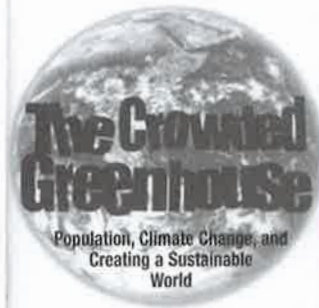
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The Crowded Greenhouse: Population, Climate, Change and Creating a Sustainable World

By John Firor & Judith E. Jacobsen

New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002. 237 pages.

Reviewed by **Elizabeth Chalecki**



John Firor and Judith E. Jacobsen

Aimed at a lay reader, *The Crowded Greenhouse* is the collaborative effort of John Firor, director emeritus of the National Center for Atmospheric Research, and his wife, population expert Judith Jacobsen. The first three chapters (written by Jacobsen) deal with population issues, and the second three chapters (written by Firor) assess climate change. This volume proceeds from the assumptions that the earth is finite, that human population cannot grow indefinitely, and that humans must act now to avoid negative environmental consequences from population growth.

Jacobsen presents an interesting synopsis of the modern population movement that begins with an outline of two contrasting arguments (Malthus versus economics) made by the first population activists. Traditional Malthusian theory argues that the earth has a finite carrying capacity and that humans will experience an ecological dieback if they continue to use resources faster than they can be replenished. For Malthusians, the best way to limit population growth is to control fertility. The economic argument, on the other hand, holds that the best way to limit population growth is to promote economic development.

This philosophical division has prompted continual debate within the population movement over how to frame population initiatives, policies, and their implications. Jacobsen points out that, while the Malthusian imperative is the baseline ecological argument for limiting population growth, successful population policies may include any or all of these points of view. To illustrate such an initiative, Jacobsen takes us through the inspirational story of Chief Bisi and the women who work with her in Nigeria to affect reproductive and economic choices on the community level. Well ahead of the famous Grameen Bank, Bisi founded the Country Women's Association of Nigeria (COWAN) for rural women to raise the necessary resources

to change their standard of living. COWAN started with \$45 and now has 1300 cooperatives across Nigeria. Its ability to integrate women's health, family planning, and economic development highlights the levels of policy change that can be accomplished with local grass-roots initiatives and sufficient funding from developed countries.

Jacobsen then outlines six principles she believes will best guide future work on population issues. She asserts that the ecological principles underlying the concern about rapid population growth are complex and non-linear, and that population issues must be approached in tandem with other issues such as peace and poverty. Jacobsen also rightly points out that legislation—such as laws restricting immigration—can only solve part of the problem, and that non-legislative initiatives (such as providing immigrants with access to reproductive-health care) can help gain voluntary cooperation where laws cannot. Finally, Jacobsen argues that there are many roads to Mecca regarding population policy; while activists cannot always change their opponents' minds, they must attempt to succeed without unanimity of belief.

The Crowded Greenhouse then shifts abruptly to the issue of climate change. John Firor takes us through the basic arguments for the existence of global warming, from the calculations of Svante Arrhenius (the Swedish chemist who first predicted climate change in 1899) to a clear and succinct discussion of the benefits and liabilities of current global climate models. Firor goes on to draw an interesting parallel between the controversy over whether climate change is actually occurring and the continuing flap over Darwin's theory of evolution. He argues that, since both Darwinism and prevailing analyses of recent climate change challenge well-entrenched social, religious, and economic interests, both theories continue to engender controversy in spite of overwhelming

amounts of supporting evidence. His synopsis of the international negotiations leading up to and including the Kyoto Protocol is also clear and informative.

Firor closes the climate-change section of the book with some general economic prescriptions to ensure that the U.S. economy truly reflects energy prices. He espouses a revenue-neutral tax shift, whereby the tax burden is shifted away from desirable economic sectors such as employment and onto undesirable sectors (e.g., those that emit pollutants and use raw materials wastefully). Firor also recommends (a) a new method of national economic accounting that would record “withdrawals” of raw materials, and (b) campaign-finance reform to pry open the disproportionate grip that resource-consuming industries have on the U.S. political process.

The final chapter of *The Crowded Greenhouse* outlines two revolutions—an equity revolution and an efficiency revolution—that the authors argue Western society must undergo to solve the issues and ramifications of both population growth and climate change. The equity revolution, Firor and Jacobson stress, would address population issues by ensuring that women and girls around the world have adequate access to health care and participation in democratic government. The efficiency revolution would maintain our economic development and standard of living while using less energy. Firor and Jacobson conclude both by noting the gains that the population and climate-change movements have made and by encouraging those who wish to work in the population and/or environmental movements not to give up in the face of continuing obstacles.

The Crowded Greenhouse is quite readable for environmentally minded newcomers to these issues. But Jacobson and Firor may be preaching to the converted, as exemplified by their admonishment at the end of Chapter 8 to “Have a thought. Join the insurrection” (page 202). Their book is also heavy on general advice and extremely light on concrete proposals. At the risk of sounding too much like Sun Tzu, there is very little in *The Crowded Greenhouse* that will help population and climate-control activists outwit their enemies.

While Jacobson’s principles regarding population are reasonable and conciliatory, they are also very broad. Her section lacks the benefit of her years of work in the population movement—namely, some specific recommendations of policies that would help stabilize population growth here and abroad. Firor’s section also suffers from similar non-specificity. While he rightly points out that climate change may have positive effects and that studies of the impacts of climate change are hindered by great complexity, these

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uncertainties have already been well documented by researchers in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the U.S. Global Change Research Program. What the climate-change debate needs is a roadmap for implementing specific policy recommendations to reduce greenhouse emissions—or, at the least, concrete recommendations on how to move the Bush administration toward the precautionary principle when dealing with global environmental matters. Firor fails to provide such a roadmap.

It would also have been helpful to read how Firor would approach the task of disarming or disproving the critics of evolution and climate change. Instead, Firor argues that these critics assume that climate change is already occurring. This is mistaken: many opponents of climate-change mitigation measures such as the Kyoto Protocol, clean air legislation, and carbon taxes do not proceed from this assumption. Given that the present U.S. administration has effectively dropped climate change as an issue, strong arguments for the fact and full consequences of climate change would seem essential to the agenda to reduce global warming.

Firor and Jacobson do encourage those working in population and environment to study the values and beliefs of those who

oppose their efforts and to use any common ground to advance their own agendas. This is excellent advice, since much anti-environmentalist sentiment is grounded in either religion or economics, both of which are often seen as absolutes. But the advice is again very general. For example, Firor recommends the removal of natural-resource extraction subsidies in an effort to make the U.S. economy account fully for the cost of using them. However, he does not specify which ones should be removed or how this might be achieved in the face of almost certain industry opposition.

Finally, the bilateral structure of the book effectively and unhelpfully segregates the two issues of population and climate change, and the final chapter fails to bring them together

sufficiently. By simply prescribing two revolutions that Western society must undertake, Firor and Jacobsen do no more than outline the many ways in which solving one problem can make an impact on the other.

But *The Crowded Greenhouse* is a good explanation of these issues for those who already acknowledge their importance. The breadth of Jacobsen and Firor's passion on these topics is impressive, and one hopes that their work in these fields continues well into the future they envision. **W**

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