

Population and AIDS

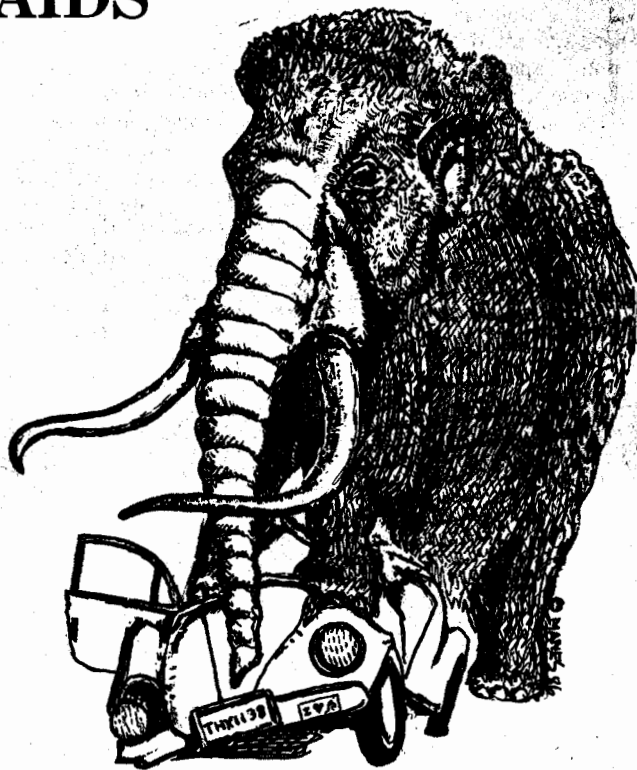
by Miss Ann Thropy

If radical environmentalists were to invent a disease to bring human population back to ecological sanity, it would probably be something like AIDS. So as hysteria sweeps over the governments of the world, let me offer an ecological perspective on the disease (with the understanding that the association between AIDS and homosexuality is purely accidental and irrelevant — in Africa it is a heterosexual disease, and is destined to be so everywhere).

I take it as axiomatic that the only real hope for the continuation of diverse ecosystems on this planet is an enormous decline in human population. Conservation, social justice, appropriate technology, etc., are great to discuss and even laudable, but they simply don't address the problem. Furthermore, the whole economy of industrial affluence (and poverty) must give way to a hunter-gatherer way of life, which is the only economy compatible with a healthy land.

Of course, such a decline is inevitable. Through nuclear war or mass starvation due to desertification or some other environmental cataclysm, human overpopulation *will* succumb to ecological limits. But in such cases, we would inherit a barren, ravaged world, devoid of otters and redwoods, Blue Whales and butterflies, tigers and orchids.

AIDS, however, has the following environmentally significant characteristics: 1) it only affects humans; 2) it has a long incubation period; 3) it is spread sexually. The first of these is the most important: AIDS has the potential to significantly reduce human population without harming other life forms. The next two characteristics make it relevant to the worldwide population problem. Diseases which are excessively virulent tend to be evolutionary failures: because they quickly kill off the hosts on which they depend, they usually lose out to less deadly forms. The Black Death is a good example. It effectively decimated Europe — so effectively that it used up the susceptible host population before it could spread far beyond its Eastern geographic limits. (The present variety of bubonic plague is thought to be a less virulent form of the disease.) AIDS, however, has a long incubation period which allows infection of others, and hence survival of the virus, before death. And because sexual activity is the most difficult human behavior to control (recent frenzied attempts by Western governments notwithstanding), the AIDS epidemic will probably spread worldwide, especially to cities where people are concentrated.



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Barring a cure, the possible benefits of this to the environment are staggering. If, like the Black Death in Europe, AIDS affected one-third of the world's population, it would cause an immediate respite for endangered wildlife on every continent. More significantly, just as the Plague contributed to the demise of feudalism, AIDS has the potential to end industrialism, which is the main force behind the environmental crisis.

Industrial society is based on the accumulation of capital from a mass of workers. That capital represents power to organize people and material in such a way as to disrupt natural cycles — by building dams, producing toxic wastes, "developing" the Third World . . . This system requires a critical number of producer/consumers. If the population goes beneath that number, industrialism cannot function. Capital dries up, governments lose authority, power fragments and devolves onto local communities which can't affect natural cycles on a large scale.

Exactly what that critical number is, I don't know, and it probably depends on many factors (deep ecologists should research this). Based on historical evidence, I guess that the population of

the US would have to decline to 50 million to really undermine its industrial economy, and down to five million to make hunting/gathering/small farming feasible. This suggests that AIDS would have to kill 80% of the world's human population to end industrialism, though even a much smaller decline would fragment economic power.

Whether AIDS will effect that many people is doubtful. Long before that, governments and institutions will enforce draconian measures to stop the disease, as they have already proposed in Europe. However, the social disruptions involved in this may cause a breakdown in technology and its export, which could also decrease human population.

None of this is intended to disregard or discount the suffering of AIDS victims. But one way or another there will be victims of overpopulation — through war, famine, humiliating poverty. As radical environmentalists, we can see AIDS not as a problem, but a necessary solution (one you probably don't want to try for yourself). To paraphrase Voltaire: if the AIDS epidemic didn't exist, radical environmentalists would have to invent one.