UN SAYS PLANETARY PLUNDERING THREATENS EARTH

The human race is plundering Earth at an unprecedented rate, but the growing power of women over their own futures could save the planet from destruction, according to the UN annual world population report for 2001. "More people are using more resources with more intensity than at any point in human history," said Alex Marshall, editor of the report. However, a ray of hope lay in the fact that women were winning the war to control their fertility and had finally gained the ear of government. "Nearly 60% of women now have access to some sort of family planning - even if you take China out of that you still have about 40%... the whole attitude has changed. You are finding a tremendous upsurge of strength among women joining together to do what they see needs to be done." His report painted an otherwise bleak picture of the planet. The world's population, which has doubled to 6.1 billion in the past 40 years, is projected to surge 50% to 9.3 billion within another half century, with all the growth in developing countries whose resources are already overstretched. "By 2050, 4.2 billion people (over 45% of the global total) will be living in countries that cannot meet the daily requirement of 50 litres of water per person to meet basic needs," the report said. Water was being used and polluted at catastrophic rates with 54% of available fresh water supplies being used annually, two-thirds of it for agriculture. This figure is set to surge to 70% by 2025 due to population growth alone, and 90% if consumption in the developing countries reaches the levels in the developed world. Water was being used at unsustainable rates in many places, with water tables under some Chinese, Latin American and South Asian cities dropping by more than one metre a year and water from seas and rivers being diverted with disastrous results.

The report said 1.1 billion people already did not have access to clean water, and in developing nations up to 95% of sewage and 70% of industrial waste was simply being dumped untreated into water courses. Vital rain forests are being destroyed at the highest rate in history, taking with them crucial sources of bio-diversity and contributing to climate warming, thereby boosting already rising sea levels. The seas continue to be massively over-exploited and erosion is taking a rising toll of plant species, one quarter of which could be lost forever by 2025.

Reuters, November 7, 2001

WILL FAST FOOD BE THE DEATH OF US?

(USA) Residents of the US spend more on fast food each year than they do on movies, books, magazines, newspapers, videos, and records combined. They spent more than $110 billion on burgers, fried chicken, and the like in 2000, compared with $6 billion in 1970. The obsession with fast food is harming adults and children alike, said Eric Schlosser, a journalist who wrote Fast Food Nation, subtitled "The Dark Side of the All-American Meal". He proposes that people essentially boycott fast food until restaurants start preparing healthier food. "People should know what they're eating, and how it's made; they should spend their money at places that make food well... nobody is forcing people to eat this stuff, and fast food places will change when customers demand changes." Even if 2 to 3% of customers complained, it would make a big drop in sales. Schlosser said. The fast food companies aren't out to harm us. But what is good for them in the short run is not good for us in the long run. Fast food isn't just the cause of obesity but, Schlosser says, it is one of the factors that is making the US the fattest country in the world, with huge costs in health care and mortality that go along with it. The typical can of soda contains the equivalent of 10 teaspoons of sugar. "Fast food places lure in the kids with toys and movie tie-ins," Schlosser said. "Parents have to be much more conscious of what their kids are eating. The first responsibility is for the parents, and then for the industry, to alter their recipes. There's no reason they can't make a healthy meal that's healthy." He contends that, unless the food is made healthy, fast-food chains should not be allowed to spend millions advertising fatty, unsafe food for children. Each day in the US about 200,000 people are made ill by food-borne pathogens (often found in ground beef). Of those who get sick, 900 are hospitalised, and 14 die annually. Meat infected with E. coli and other pathogens are distributed far and wide because of industrialised production and inadequate government oversight, Schlosser said. Today's food processing methods, where parts of many animals go into one burger, may only increase the odds of infection. Schlosser cites a 1996 Agriculture Department study that found 78.6% of ground beef samples from processing plants around the country contained microbes that are spread primarily by faecal material. With his own kids, Schlosser takes his cue from Nancy Reagan's advice about drugs: "Just Say No." His children, aged 9 and 11, have stopped begging for fast food.


DIET COULD PREVENT KIDNEY STONES

(ITALY) A diet low in salt and meat can dramatically reduce the risk of kidney stones, according to an Italian study that could spell the end for the low-calcium diet that doctors have been recommending for years. Many doctors have told such patients to cut down on calcium because most kidney stones are made of a calcium compound. But recent studies have suggested that such a diet might not prevent kidney stones, after all, and may even promote them, along with osteoporosis. The new study "dispelled a myth that a low-calcium diet is important in preventing kidney stones," said Dr David A. Bushinsky, a kidney specialist at the University of Rochester. William Keane, president of the (US) National Kidney Foundation, said he is sure the new diet "will become the gold standard". The University of Parma study randomly assigned either a low-calcium diet or a diet low in salt and extremely low in protein to men who had had at least one kidney stone. 60 men were assigned to each diet. 23 men on the low-calcium diet had another kidney stone within five years, compared with 12 on the low-salt, low-protein diet, Dr Loris Borghi reported in the New England Journal of Medicine. A co-author, Dr Umberto Maggiore, explained that people on a low-calcium diet excrete less calcium in their urine.
but more of the other substance - oxalate - that combines with calcium to form most kidney stones. In addition, salt and one protein common in meat lead to more calcium in the urine, which in turn contributes to the formation of kidney stones, Bushinsky said. He said he has not prescribed a low-calcium diet in a decade because of evidence that it leaches calcium from the bones, making them weaker. Women were not included in the Italian study because of the danger of osteoporosis. The low-salt, low-protein diet allowed 2,900 mg of salt per day (2,400 mg is the maximum recommended by the American Heart Association). But people were allowed only about three-quarters of an ounce of meat per day, with just over an ounce of cheese or other dairy protein.

Dr Julie R. Ingelfinger, the journal’s deputy editor, wrote that the diet has been proved effective only for men in Italy’s Parma region, but is worth trying “for anyone who has had a stone or who has witnessed the suffering of a friend or family member with a stone.” Maggiore said the diet would be equally effective in any country, but he noted that it might be harder to get Americans to stick to it because meat makes up such a great part of the US diet.

STUDY FINDS EARTH WORSE 10 YEARS AFTER SUMMIT

(USA) A decade after the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, where the largest gathering of world leaders ever at that point discussed how to create a more liveable planet, there has been far more decline than progress, according to the report State of the World 2002 by the Worldwatch Institute in Washington DC. The 1992 Earth Summit produced a blueprint for achieving sustainable development and laid the groundwork for the Kyoto Protocol, the international climate-change accord signed in 1997 and another international treaty on biodiversity. A decade later the conclusion is inescapable that there has been far more decline than progress since the Brazil summit. While public awareness of environmental and social issues critical to sustaining a liveable world increased during the 1990s, major global problems like climate change, species extinction, deforestation and water scarcity worsened dramatically.

“The new consciousness has yet to register improvements on the ground for most global environmental issues,” the report said.

More than 80,000 people are expected to attend the follow-up meeting, the World Summit on Sustainable Development, to be held in Johannesburg, South Africa in September. Among the trends cited in the report: -- The evidence is much stronger today than in 1992 that climate change is caused by greenhouse gases, principally carbon dioxide, and that the results are already being profoundly felt. Global carbon emissions grew 9% over the decade and US carbon emissions by 18%. -- Use of wind and solar energy grew vigorously as technological advances sharply lowered the price per kilowatt-hour. But the world still gets 90% of its commercial energy from fossil fuels, the chief source of man-made carbon emissions.

While the amount of forested land has been increasing in the US and Europe, the world overall continues to lose forests. The UN Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that the global loss of forested area is 2.2% over the decade, but the World Resources Institute places the amount at over 19%. The degradation of coral reefs nearly tripled over the decade with an estimated 27% of reefs lost. The number of deaths from four of the world’s six leading infectious diseases – lower respiratory infections, diarrhoeal diseases, tuberculosis and measles – declined over the decade, but resistance to antibiotics threatens to reverse the declines. Further, the declines were more than offset by the sixfold increase in AIDS deaths over the same period.

There have been some notable areas of progress. Production of ozone-depleting chlorofluorocarbons, for example, was reduced by 87% between 1987 and 1997. After a lag of a few more years, the lower emissions levels should begin to allow Earth's thinning ozone layer to heal and the “ozone hole” to shrink, according to the report. "It is too late for the (Johannesburg) summit to avoid the conclusion that there is a gap between the goals and promises set out in Rio and the daily reality in rich and poor countries alike," wrote UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in a foreword to the report, "But it is not too late to set the transformation more convincingly in motion." Gary Gardner, one of the report's co-authors, called for a "war on environmental decline and human suffering that is every bit as well-funded as the war on terrorism," saying the issues of world security, poverty and environmental degradation are interwoven.

NEW PIG PLANT IN CHINA

(CHINA) China has recently commissioned its biggest and most technically advanced pig slaughtering and processing factory, under the Tianjin City Shunli Industrial Development Inc.

The large-scale modernisation of the plant cost over 300 million yuan and covers a site of more than 40,000 square metres. The new plant has an intelligent (sic) slaughtering line and two automatic storage areas as well as auxiliary equipment and facilities.

The new plant is designed to kill 1.8 - 2 million pigs per year and much of the design work has been carried out by overseas specialists using the major EU and USDA standards. Shunli Industrial has introduced world leading technology and equipment from Switzerland and Denmark, including advanced systems of carbon dioxide stunning, vacuum blood sampling, automatic carcass cutting, vacuum packing, automatic storage and computerised quarantine.

The company also has its own breeding centre for boars, a scientific monitored pig rearing farm, a feed production unit, slaughtering and processing facility and marketing system.

ALZHEIMER’S MAY BE LINKED TO NORMAL DIET BY-PRODUCT

(USA) People with high blood levels of a normal diet by-product, homocysteine, have twice the average risk of developing Alzheimer’s disease, a study has found. The study suggests that other major degenerative diseases like cardiovascular disease and diabetes may stem at least in part from diet, possibly making them preventable. The study, by researchers at Boston University and Tufts University, is published in The New England Journal of Medicine.

Winter 2002

New Vegetarian and Natural Health 11