

## *"The Bad Boy of Biology": Garrett Hardin, 1915–2003*

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Garrett Hardin, Ph.D.—biologist, environmental ethicist, and lightning rod for controversy for over four decades—died in a double suicide with his wife in September 2003 at his longtime home in Santa Barbara, where he was a Professor Emeritus of Human Biology at the University of California. Both Hardins had been ill for some time and in fact were leaders in the local chapter of the Hemlock Society, the “right-to-die” advocacy organization.

Hardin was my undergraduate advisor, and I kept in touch with him through the years. Some time ago, one of the major environmental organizations mailed out an appeal for contributions, accompanied by a brochure listing “the most important environmental issues for the future.” On the list were most of the now-familiar and undeniably serious problems our planet faces: pollution, the greenhouse effect, threatened wildlife and rainforests, and so on. At first glance it appeared to be a comprehensive list, but to my eyes there was a glaring omission—the most fundamental environmental problem was missing entirely. That problem is population, or more specifically, human overpopulation.

When I showed this list to Garrett Hardin and voiced my concern about the omission, his response was characteristically pragmatic: “Isn’t that interesting,” he said with a chuckle. “But not surprising. My guess is that pop-

ulation did come up when they were putting together that list, and they probably decided not to include it because they didn’t know what to do about it—and because they’d only get called names if they did suggest anything!”

Hardin did not set out to become controversial. Nor did he expect to make a career of challenging conventional wisdoms, often on topics where discussion was implicitly forbidden in polite society. But over 40 years of teaching, writing, lecturing, and testifying on “any controversial problem that has a biological component,” Hardin developed a worldwide reputation for stirring up debate and emotion regarding issues such as abortion, foreign aid, immigration, wilderness, nuclear energy, and his underlying perennial topic of population. In so doing, he earned himself nicknames like “the bad boy of biology,” “the ecologist with an edge,” “the original thinker’s original thinker”—all monikers he probably found flattering in some way. There were also other less charitable labels and epithets directed his way. Hardin described himself as an “ecoconservative,” a seemingly contradictory but innocuous enough term until the implications of some of his arguments sink in.

Born in Texas in 1915, Hardin recalled that he decided on a career in science early on but quite by chance. “I just

liked some of my teachers," he recalled. "That may not be a logical way to choose one's life work, but it might be as good as any other way." He earned a Bachelor's degree in zoology from the University of Chicago and a Stanford University doctorate in biology. As a member of the Biology Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara, he authored a widely used college text and, by the 1950s, began producing the prolific flow of journal articles, editorials, books, and popular writings that earned him his reputation and notoriety.

Hardin's recurring themes include the negative impacts of collective denial of unpleasant biological and ecological realities (the title of one of his collections of essays is *Stalking the Wild Taboo*), the ecological necessity of attaching responsibilities to the right to procreate and the use of resources, and the impossibility of action without repercussion in an ecological system. His most famous article, "The Tragedy of the Commons," first appeared in *Science* in 1968 and presented such a strikingly different conception of the then newly recognized environmental crisis that it is still widely considered a landmark in modern thought. In his subsequent and even more infamous article "Living on a Lifeboat," he applied the "commons" reasoning to foreign aid, concluding that in the long run such well-intentioned charity is likely to do more harm than good.

A soft-spoken, grandfatherly man who was quick to laugh, Hardin in person appeared an unlikely firebrand. Excerpts from his wide-ranging observations, from an interview done in the mid 1990s, give a flavor of his thoughts. Even many of us who knew and liked him didn't agree with all he said, but he was certain to make one think.

These few words are offered in his memory.

## On Abortion

"I became involved with the abortion issue because of my interest in population, but soon learned not to link the two subjects in talking or writing, and to never try to tackle more than one taboo at a time. The day after my first major talk on abortion in 1963, I got a phone call from a woman wanting an abortion. From that point on until California liberalized its abortion laws in 1970, my wife and I became part of a network finding safe abortions for women in Mexico. We didn't send them to anyone in this country, because we knew that sooner or later a police "plant" would nail us. We kept tabs on who the good providers were, and removed some if there were problems. We did check out Japan and Sweden, where abortion was legal, but they were too expensive and paternalistic there.

"We're now paying for the sins of the biology professors—we should have long ago gotten across the notions of embryology and the basic bioeconomics of human development, and the fact that the earliest stages of human life from a strictly embryonic point of view are worth practically nothing. In my opinion and in that of most biologists, early abortion has almost no ethical implications—all this fuss about this 'terrible moral problem' is a bunch of nonsense. In all animals there is a tremendous loss of life at the earliest stages and it doesn't matter. All animals are capable of or even prone to reproducing far beyond their ability to take care of the products of conception. If you can't take care of them, and some are going to die, the earlier the better.

"Western religious literature is almost silent on abortion. People who say it is against the laws of religion are simply wrong. There's nothing in the original literature that amounts to a hill of

beans on abortion. It's all been 'faked up' in recent decades. And until about 1870, abortion was of no concern to ethicists or doctors, but was performed by midwives and men had nothing to do with it."

### **On Population**

"There is no way to write a code of ethics for the individual that will solve the population problem, because population is a problem for groups and has to be solved by community ethics—and that is something utterly different. What is required is mutual coercion, mutually agreed on. I think many people see this intuitively or subconsciously but immediately react against it because they don't like the idea of losing individual rights in the interest of the greater community. Frequently that rejection takes the form of denying that any problem exists at all. Also, whenever somebody does try to address the problem in a practical manner, you hear all kinds of accusations of Nazism, genocide, and the like. So the best way to approach the issue may be with policies that make no overt reference to population, such as restrictions on housing or marriages. Such policies are not new, and it's been shown they can be effective.

"There's this lovely view that there is no such thing as overpopulation, that it's all a matter of distribution of resources. But what makes people assume that distribution is going to become more favorable? And from the broadest point of view, would we want it to? Do we want many more people using resources at the levels the affluent do? We're all going to have to cut back as it is. We have to talk about the 'cultural carrying capacity' of each nation. Some people will be genuinely more happy with less consumption, but many will not. It's a question

of values, and those are not easily changed."

### **On Foreign Aid and Development**

"Our whole concept of aid is based on the theory of the 'demographic transition,' which says that if we feed people and make them more affluent, they will stop having so many babies. But by 1975, the leading figures in demography had already concluded it was all poppycock. Studies show that what occurred in Europe has not been duplicated elsewhere and that if you increase nutritional status you tend to increase fertility. But the theory lives on among other people because it's what they want to believe, and implies we won't have to really confront population problems, as the demographic transition will supposedly take care of it. It also serves the needs of anyone who wants to shake money out of people to feed the starving and so forth. It amounts to a superstition that is one of the most dreadful obstacles we have to face.

"We have to respect the sovereignty of nations, to tell them that 'We're not going to solve your population problems, you have to do it.' Only nations that have decided to be self-reliant in this regard have accomplished anything. Even if they do decide to use what we call draconian measures to cut fertility, the outside world should applaud them for trying. We have no business telling them what to do—except if we could attach 'strings' to our aid, specifying that population must be addressed. But such proposals have never gotten out of committees in Congress."

### **On Immigration**

"We're caught in a trap laid by our own heritage and that terrible poem on the Statue of Liberty. How many

people should we let in? I don't have the answer, but our quotas now are too high and too elastic. Again, we can't let other nations try to solve their problems by expecting us to take the overflow. Often it takes some unforeseen disaster for people to see this. If there's enough trouble—and on the U.S.-Mexico border there is trouble, most of which does not make it into the newspapers—people will start to say 'enough.' There are ways to deal with the problem. Tremendous disruption in Mexico might trigger such thoughts, but politicians cannot even mention such things now."

### **On Pollution**

"Human error is probably our biggest risk. For example, the Exxon Valdez fiasco was so predictable, but all the warnings were dismissed by 'practical' people. We were afraid it might be the Alaskan pipeline that caused a spill, but it turned out the problem was just somewhere else along the chain. Economists still treat these mishaps as 'external' costs, but they're only external to the accounting books of the polluting firms. There is really no such thing as an external effect. What we're ultimately talking about are limited absorptive resources for the wastes of humans."

### **On Nuclear Energy**

"Chernobyl was right in line with my contention that it is the human factor we have to worry about, not the technological issues. The paradox is that, the safer you make the technical systems, the duller the jobs are for those who work there, and it's harder to get intelligent people to take those jobs. Then one day a problem strikes, and they don't know what to do. Even the high-school dropouts are too intelligent for the drudgery of the power

plant jobs, so they get bored and drink, take drugs, or fall asleep on the job."

### **On Modern Agriculture**

"Much of modern agriculture is a mistake. The only reason we've gotten away with it for so long is that the damage it does is so slight each year that we hardly notice. But finally we have to pay the cost when we've lost our topsoil. And with insecticides it's even worse. You see, ecologists have essentially a conservative attitude, and you can see it perhaps best in traditional farmers. People come in and tell them there are 'better' ways to do things, but the farmers resist. And in many cases it turns out they were right to resist."

### **On Wilderness**

"National parks such as Yosemite should only be accessible to people under their own power. If you're going to make the wilderness accessible to people like me [Hardin lost the use of his legs to childhood polio and relied on crutches], you'll ruin it for everyone. So, as much I would like to experience wilderness, I know I cannot. Even as it is, things are too crowded, so we'll have to ration access in some way, whether by auction, waiting lines, or lottery. If you do not do something that keeps the numbers of people down to an agreed-on number that preserves the quality of the wilderness, you ruin it for everyone."

### **On Climate Change**

"All of these issues are so closely related to growing population. There's no doubt that we should be doing all we can to remedy these problems—while we try to get a handle on the population pressures that contribute to them all."

**On “Ecoterrorism” or  
“Monkey-Wrenching”**

I disapprove of frank outlawry. If I were approving of that, I don't see how I could continue to disapprove of people who blockade or bomb abortion clinics—they're both doing something they feel so strongly about that they'll disobey any laws. And if people in Greenpeace or Earth First! get hurt or killed doing these things, they should know what they were getting into. Now, if that leads to outlawing fishing on the high seas or clearcutting, it may have achieved their aim. I just don't have much sympathy with martyrs.”

**On “Deep Ecology”**

“I don't know what that is. I think some people are using a lot of fancy rhetoric to put a gloss on the issues. This could do more harm than good. I

think deep ecology attracts some deep nuts.”

**On the Future**

“Even though my own thinking has led to a lot of pessimistic conclusions, I think I must have some kind of optimistic hormones. For people deciding whether to procreate today, I think as things now stand you just have to make that decision on a personal basis. There are so many unknowns. Some people will be happy under virtually any circumstances. Could you raise a child to be happy in a crumbling world? Could you give that child values so they could live amidst disaster and still be fulfilled?

“In trying to save something for posterity, we can't be so exhaustive in our consumption and treatment of what we have in the present. Our whole economic system discounts the future. But the future will arrive.”