

He Ponders Future-and Works for Change Researcher's Report on 'State of the World' Sees Need for Solutions on a Global Scale

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ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

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Brown said he can envision, in the not too distant future, that as gasoline becomes scarce, Los Angeles would virtually grind to a halt, unlike Washington, which Brown said has a subway system that would allow the city to continue functioning normally. Brown also said that because of the unbridled population growth and faltering economy in Mexico, it is inevitable that more and more of that country's young people will migrate to Los Angeles, straining the water and gasoline systems even more.

TOP PROBLEMS Lester Brown, president of Worldwatch Institute in Washington, D.C., listed for The Times what he considers the world's 10 most serious problems, and six problems that he said especially affect California. The problems are not in any particular order. Ten most serious worldwide problems: POPULATION GROWTH. World population is growing by 83 million people annually, about 90% of them in Third World countries. ARMS RACE. Worldwide military expenditures exceed income of the poorest one-half of humanity. GLOBAL WARMING. Carbon dioxide from fossil fuel will trap rising heat, melting polar ice, and raising ocean levels to threaten low-lying coastal regions. DEPLETION OF PROTECTIVE OZONE SHIELD. Industrial chemicals will react with the ozone layer in upper atmosphere, allowing more ultraviolet rays to reach Earth, increasing skin cancer, reducing crop yields, suppressing human immune systems. DEFORESTATION. Lumber production, paper making and firewood gathering are reducing forest cover in the Third World. SOIL EROSION. Wind and water erosion are reducing productivity on one-third of world's cropland. CIGARETTE SMOKING. Death rate related to cigarette smoking in North America rivals death rate from famine in Africa. TOXIC MATERIALS. Poisonous agricultural and industrial chemicals are found in ground water. WATER SCARCITY. Falling water tables are commonplace on every continent. ACID RAIN. Acidification of forest soil is destroying trees throughout Europe and, to a lesser extent, North America. Six California problems: OIL ADDICTION. California's per capita consumption of dwindling oil supply is among the world's highest. WATER SCARCITY. Demand for water is outstripping supply in much of the state. IMMIGRATION PRESSURES. Natural resources of the state will be taxed by intensified immigration from Latin America. GROUND-WATER CONTAMINATION. Intensive use of agricultural chemicals plus industrial wastes create extensive contamination. AIR POLLUTION. California air pollution is among the world's worst due largely to automobiles and atmospheric conditions. CIGARETTE SMOKING. Deaths and adverse health effects from cigarettes dwarf those from air pollution and ground-water contamination combined.

FULL TEXT

For most people, it's difficult enough just to fight the traffic, get to work on time, chauffeur the kids around, work on relationships and try to do all those things we are told are good for us: exercise more, quit smoking, lose weight, floss our teeth and meditate away our stress.

Amid this flurry of daily activity it is a rare individual who has the time, energy or inclination to ask the question, "What will the world be like in 100 years? In 500 years?"

His Life's Work

Lester Brown, who focuses his life's work on this question, admits that only a "small fraction" of people share his concern.

But he is single-handedly helping to enlarge that group. This week he and his staff issued the fourth annual edition of a series of books called "State of the World," assembled by the Washington-based Worldwatch Institute.

Brown, recipient of a \$250,000 MacArthur Foundation "genius grant," has been described by the Washington Post as "one of the world's most influential thinkers." He founded the nonprofit Worldwatch Institute in 1974 to follow planetary trends in every area from ecology to economics.

His yearly "State of the World" books have been incorporated into college courses and read all over the world in Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, Indonesian, German, Polish and other languages. And a PBS television special based on his reports is planned. Brown's books have given the Earth an increasingly grim report card each year. And many of the troubles could affect Los Angeles even more than other places.

"Many of the stresses will affect Los Angeles more directly, more acutely and sooner than other cities, perhaps more than any other major city," Brown said in an interview in his downtown office.

Serious Consequences

Brown, 52, has long been considered a worldwide authority on food problems, working for the Department of Agriculture and the International Agricultural Development Service in the 1960s.

This year's report warns that the staggering growth of the world's population is taxing the Earth's vital resources to the point where some "have surpassed many natural thresholds, including the capacity of forests to tolerate pollution, the ability of the atmosphere to absorb waste gases and of cropland to sustain cultivation."

These trends pose "serious economic consequences and direct threats to the Earth's future habitability," said Brown, who predicted the famine in Ethiopia long before most others did.

Growing up on New Jersey farmland near the Delaware River, Brown always had planned to spend his life growing tomatoes. But in 1956, after his graduation from Rutgers, Brown went to India with an international youth exchange program and spent nearly six months living in Indian villages.

Upon his return, Brown resumed growing tomatoes, but found that the poverty and problems he had seen in India "kept working on me. I think that probably was the experience that separated me from growing tomatoes. I realized that wasn't as challenging as the world food problem."

He started work at the Department of Agriculture in 1959 as an agricultural analyst and in 1964 became an adviser to the secretary of agriculture on foreign agricultural policy.

In his annual books, Brown writes about things people have heard of before: the mysterious hole in the ozone layer, the warming trend or "greenhouse effect," the loss of arable lands and forests—things that seem so invisible and meaningless in most urban dwellers' daily lives. But Brown factors these trends together and concludes, "No generation has ever faced such a complex set of issues requiring immediate attention. Preceding generations have always been concerned about the future, but ours is the first to be faced with decisions that will determine whether the Earth our children inherit will be inhabitable."

Although he hesitates to put the problems in any order of priority, there are a few urgent areas he thought need immediate attention.

"For some time we've been aware that fossil fuel (such as coal, oil and gas) combustion would raise atmospheric carbon dioxide and thus lead to the greenhouse effect," said Brown, meaning that the Earth's temperature rises due to emissions of carbon dioxide and other gases.

Global Effect

"We've known for some time that was a possibility," Brown said, "but now it's beginning to happen. This is the first time we have reported evidence of the global greenhouse effect."

Pointing out that five of the nine warmest years since 1850 have occurred in the last decade, Brown also noted that "the ozone layer in the upper atmosphere over Antarctica is being depleted, apparently by the industrial release of chlorofluorocarbons. . . . The resulting increase in ultraviolet radiation reaching populated areas would cause more skin cancers, impair human immune systems and retard crop growth."

It's easy for the average person to say, "I can't do anything about this," but Brown disagrees with that.

"The bottom-line question is, 'Do we care about the world in which our children and grandchildren will live?'" Brown said. "Does it matter that if we continue to burn fossil fuels at our current rate they (our children) will live through one of the most wrenching climate changes in history?"

When the Earth warms, the oceans expand and glaciers melt, eventually flooding several low-lying areas in the world, including the rice paddies in Asia, and even cities like Washington. Farming patterns would be thrown into disarray.

"The question," Brown said, "is whether through research enough people can become concerned about ozone depletion and climate change so that they will support an effective political response."

Brown thinks, for example, that people should encourage Congress to pass a law similar to the one it wrote in 1976 that required cars to increase fuel efficiency. Brown thinks cars should get 52 miles per gallon of gas, and that it can be done, despite the howls that would be heard from the auto industry.

"It would permit us to maintain our mobility and not alter the Earth's climate in the process," he said.

Nuclear Skepticism

Brown also urges people to take a skeptical look at nuclear power. Since there now have been two serious core-damaging accidents at nuclear power plants, at Three Mile Island in 1978 and at Chernobyl in 1986, scientists were able to extrapolate that "we can expect three more accidents between now and the end of the century. What we don't know is where or how serious they will be."

Brown thinks that both the United States and Soviet Union are wasting too much money and energy on the arms race, while Japan, which has a very low defense budget, has become the most powerful country in the world, because of its economic status.

"For a generation now world leaders have been preoccupied with this East-West conflict, the arms race," Brown said, "while the Japanese have quietly begun redefining geopolitics in economic rather than military terms. So Japan has emerged as a power that economically is so strong that it has, in many situations, far greater influence than the U.S., which is losing its economic power in the world.

"The U.S. is focusing so much of its budget and its manpower on the arms race, has concentrated so much on the military definition of power that we've lost sight of the fact that real influence in the world derives not so much from the number of tanks but from the productivity of one's factories. The Japanese have left us in the dust."

So, Brown would suggest, what a person could do is lobby his member of Congress to spend less on the arms race, and more on domestic education and productivity.

Another change people can be thinking of, Brown said, is that the designing of new communities should be done in such a way that people are able to walk or bicycle to work, a trend he sees as inevitable in the future. He walks nine blocks to his Washington office now.

Brown sees Los Angeles in a potentially difficult situation, due to dwindling water supply and increasing population, as well as automobile addiction.

"If I were the mayor of Los Angeles," Brown said, "my agenda would be, No. 1, implement the most effective family planning program possible; No. 2, develop a better public transportation system, such as an above-ground rail system; No. 3, that as a city it get really serious about water efficiency and developing technologies that will lead the way in water conservation."

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continue functioning normally. Brown also said that because of the unbridled population growth and faltering economy in Mexico, it is inevitable that more and more of that country's young people will migrate to Los Angeles, straining the water and gasoline systems even more.

As part of the answer to this problem, Brown said, "We think we've reached the point where the secretary general of the United Nations should urge national leaders everywhere to adopt the 'Stop at Two Children' goal. It's clear the Earth's life support systems are really beginning to stagger under the pressures of 5 billion of us, and 83 million more each year now."

Achieved by Italy

Asked if that would be a particular problem for Mexico, due to the large numbers of Roman Catholics who eschew artificial birth control methods, Brown noted that Italy has achieved zero population growth, and he hopes Mexico would work toward it, too.

"Certainly," Brown said, "the United States should be supporting the International Planned Parenthood Federation and the United Nations fund for population activities. We've cut off support of both for ideological reasons," primarily opposition to abortion.

"Even if you're an avid pro-lifer," Brown said, "I think you have to support family planning rather than famine, which is the alternative for some countries in Africa, for example."

Brown does take a break from the world's problems, running several miles three or four miles a week, competing in an occasional marathon and riding his bike to weekly touch football games with an "over-the-hill" team.

"It's really relaxing," he said. "For a couple hours the only thing that matters is winning the game." Brown said that it would indeed be depressing working on world problems every day, "if no one paid any attention to it." But as more and more people take notice, he said he is "encouraged."

"These problems are not insuperable."

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Illustration

PHOTO: Lester Brown and the Worldwatch Institute staff have issued the fourth annual "State of the World" book series. / BERNIE BOSTON / Los Angeles Times; DRAWING: Traffic Immigration Smoking

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