

Essay by Noah Muldavin

After millennia of expanding population, growing economies, and technological advances we have finally reached the tipping point: our civilization is too large for the world we inhabit. Our dominant economic and social paradigms, in which sustained market expansion is still viewed as necessary for a prosperous society, are not equipped to deal with this reality. If mankind is to survive, it is imperative that we alter our most fundamental assumptions about our economy, population, and lifestyles. We must reconcile our dependence on growth and consumption with the reality that we live on a finite planet.

As a society, we sometimes lose sight of the fact that the global economy only exists as a method of effectively distributing the earth's natural resources. Seemingly unnatural economic elements such as interest rates, television commercials, and department stores are in fact only extensions of the biosphere that sustains us. We must abandon the antiquated notion that our economy, our society, and even ourselves are somehow separate from the earth.

The period in which economic expansion is in the best interest of society has come to a close. Because, as stated, the global economy is an extension of the biosphere, it is consequently subject to its limits. Though today's politicians and economists are desperately attempting to stimulate growth as a method of revitalizing the economy, any growth will only perpetuate a much deeper economic problem. As calculated by the Global Footprint Network, the world currently uses 1.3 times its share of renewable resources each year. Thus, any growth is achieved only at the expense of future generations. In order to preserve the earth upon which we depend we must abandon the notion that economic expansion is always beneficial and instead work to create a sustainable and ecologically responsible society.

But even if the average citizen's ecological footprint were cut in half, we would still be facing impending ecological doom because of our rampant population growth. The current food shortage (projected by the U.N. to continue through 2010) is showing the first signs of the growing population crisis: the earth can no longer produce enough food to feed us. In order to prevent mass starvation, resource wars, and famine, we must abandon our affinity for large families and irresponsible birth rates. Governments and other organizations need to take proactive stances on family planning and birth control.

Mankind has enjoyed the benefit of a seemingly endless supply of land and resources, but it is clear that our civilization can no longer afford to expand as we have; we have reached the limit. If we are to survive we shall require a substantially new manner of thinking in which we acknowledge that our civilization can only exist within the limits prescribed by our planet. We must abandon the foolhardy notion that unlimited expansion can exist in a finite world, lest we suffer the consequences.