

Audio Transcript: So Over Population, Part 2

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Sam Evans-Brown: [00:00:00] Hey there listener. This is a two part story, so if you're hearing this one without having heard the first of our stories about the politics of population, you should really go back and listen to that one. It's got a ton of historical context that really helps to understand this episode. Okay. Have fun. Justine Paradis.

Justine Paradis: [00:00:20] Hi!

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:00:20] Jimmy Gutierrez.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:00:21] Yo.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:00:23] So I left you all in a bit of a cliffhanger at the end of the last episode.

Justine Paradis: [00:00:27] Right there was. There was about. There was [00:00:30] about to be a takeover, a mutiny.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:00:32] All right, let's start with Ben Zuckerman. He was born in the 40s. And I've heard him described as a red diaper baby.

Justine Paradis: [00:00:39] What? What does this mean? I feel like it can't mean what I think it means.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:00:43] Like, his parents were communists, and they raised him as a communist from the time that he was in diapers.

Ben Zuckerman: [00:00:48] My family was definitely very left wing, but we were also very involved in just general, you know, liberal causes. My, my sister Ellen was a Freedom rider. [00:01:00] She marched with Martin Luther King from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, in 1965. I'm older than Ellen. In 1959, I was on the second ever

civil rights march in Washington, D.C. Harry, this is before Martin Luther King. This Harry Belafonte was was the big celebrity on our march.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:01:20] That was when he was 15 years old, which, incidentally, is also the year he graduated from high school. Graduated early.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:01:26] Wow.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:01:26] He went on to MIT, studied physics, aeronautics [00:01:30] and astronautics, and then went on to Harvard. Got a PhD in astronomy.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:01:34] Real genius kid over here.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:01:36] Well, hard sciences for sure. And to hear him tell it from a very early age, he considered himself an environmentalist.

Ben Zuckerman: [00:01:41] When I was a teenager in the 1950s, I realized that American women were having many babies. I think the typical family size was about three and a half children or so per woman, which indicated that the United States was going [00:02:00] to undergo a huge population explosion if the fertility of American women stayed as high as it was during the 1950s. And I felt that even then, it seemed to me the US was populated enough.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:02:16] Ben graduates, moves to California, has a job teaching at UCLA. And then in 1969, as the environmental movement is getting into full swing, he joins the Sierra Club. Do we need a refresher on the Sierra Club?

Justine Paradis: [00:02:28] It's like the biggest and oldest, [00:02:30] right?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:02:30] Biggest sort of depends on what you mean. It's not the biggest in terms of budget, but it's very grassroots. There are local chapters all over the place. So old school Western environmentalism, the mountains are calling and I must go. Recently they've had this thing called the Beyond Coal campaign, where they've hired lawyers to go out and get all these coal plants shut down. So they're big, they're effective. They have a long history.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:02:52] I'm nodding. You can't hear that, listener, but I'm nodding.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:02:55] And for decades, Ben wasn't really involved in the Sierra Club. [00:03:00] He just sent in his check. That is until 1996.

Ben Zuckerman: [00:03:04] But then in the mid 1990s, the Sierra Club board of directors took took a position to essentially not address U.S population growth.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:03:19] Ben actually slightly mischaracterized the Sierra Club vote. Their the decision they made was to take no position to declare themselves formally neutral on [00:03:30] U.S immigration policy.

Ben Zuckerman: [00:03:32] And I found that a tremendously anti-environmental. And so two other Sierra Club members and I got together and we founded an internal Sierra Club organization called Sierrans for U.S Population Stabilization.

Justine Paradis: [00:03:50] I just I just don't understand why is immigration policy coming up in a population discussion, like, because population is a global problem. What does immigration have to do with it?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:03:59] That we [00:04:00] will get to that question. But Ben's group, the Sierrans for US Population Stabilization started to attract attention and the people who supported them came from all over the political spectrum, including some figures who had some, shall we say, more troubling ideas.

Heidi Beirich: [00:04:16] Nobody in the Sierra Club seems to understand that this is even happening, right? It was almost like a sleeper campaign.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:04:22] That's Heidi Beirich, a researcher at the Southern Poverty Law Center, and back then she was working to track white supremacists. Part of her job was to read a [00:04:30] bunch of anti-immigrant and nativist newsletters. And as she was reading these pretty fringy publications, she noticed these ads that were urging people to join the Sierra Club.

Heidi Beirich: [00:04:42] Well, I was like, what the hell is this? Why? You know, like it was the last place in the world that I expected to see somebody recruiting for the Sierra Club.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:05:01] This [00:05:00] is Outside/In, a show about the natural world and how we use it. Today is the second in our two part series on the politics of population. In this episode, we're digging into the story of how around the turn of the millennium, population got all tangled up in immigration in one vote at the Sierra Club, and how that ugly fight represents a pivot point, a transition from the environmental politics of the 70s and 80s to the environmental politics of today.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:05:39] So [00:05:30] can we just take a quick stab at summarizing the takeaway from last episode?

Justine Paradis: [00:05:44] Why don't you take a quick stab at summarizing the last episode?

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:05:48] I'm not for that.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:05:49] I would say that the environmental movement got caught up in a particularly widespread flare of population anxiety, and because of their white, affluent roots. [00:06:00]

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:06:00] Cough, racism, cough.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:06:01] The solutions that they proposed were all directed at black and brown people and women's bodies. And then they, and then they got called out, and...

Justine Paradis: [00:06:12] Right, and then everyone in policy circles at this point just talks about it by promoting female empowerment and women's education and reproductive choice, which is great. You know?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:06:22] Before we continue the story, I think a lot of people who wish that we were still explicitly talking about, quote, overpopulation, [00:06:30]

unquote, and probably Ben Zuckerman fits into this category. I think a lot of these people believe that more than just not talking about it, we're not dealing with it either. The environmentalists are shirking their their duty to protect the planet. But having considered the evidence, I don't think we can say that's true. People are still actively working to limit population growth. For starters, there's a whole bunch of organizations that are working to give women access to health care and contraception in countries that have really [00:07:00] high birth rates. And some of these are even American organizations. Okay.

Munira Bashir: [00:07:03] Okay, so my name is Munira Bashir. Um, I'm the Kenya country director for the Nature Conservancy in based in Nairobi, Kenya.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:07:12] The Nature Conservancy is probably the world's biggest environmental NGO. Here in the US. Its budget is three times bigger than the next biggest NGO. So and when I asked to be put in touch with somebody who is working on population issues, the US based public relations person said no, no, no, [00:07:30] we don't, we don't actually do that. But then when she got me in touch with Munira, Munira was like, yeah, we work on women's issues, but population growth is a top ten concern for us here.

Munira Bashir: [00:07:40] There is limited land. The population is growing at a, at a high rate. And where will all these people live? How are they? How is the country going to feed them?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:07:50] So there are still tons of organizations working on these little ones, big ones. And of course one particularly big one.

Arthur Erken: [00:07:57] I am Arthur Erken. I'm the director [00:08:00] of communications and strategic partnerships at the United Nations Population Fund, UNFPA.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:08:06] The United Nations. Globally, countries around the world give around \$9 billion a year to support women's reproductive health and family planning spread among various agencies. Arthur Erken's program gets about 10% of

that and estimates it helps around 12 million women prevent unintended pregnancies a year.

Arthur Erken: [00:08:21] I think what we see in Europe, there is still broad support for these activities across a broad political spectrum.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:08:28] What's more, American [00:08:30] environmental groups are actually talking about population.

Stephanie Feldstein: [00:08:33] And we do this in a number of ways. Our most well known is our creative media, such as our endangered species condoms.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:08:39] Wait, what did she say?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:08:40] Endangered species condoms.

Justine Paradis: [00:08:42] So many questions.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:08:45] I've never heard those words together before.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:08:47] That is Stephanie Feldstein. She's with the center for Biological Diversity, which works mostly using the Endangered Species Act, suing people who are infringing on endangered species habitat.

Stephanie Feldstein: [00:08:58] We have volunteers that give [00:09:00] about 100,000 of these away every single year all across the country. And these are condoms that come in colorful packages with wildlife art on them. And sayings like, "wrap with care, save the polar bear."

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:09:12] "Wrap with care, save the polar bear." "When you're feeling tender, think of the hellbender." "Before it gets any hotter, remember the sea otter." And we've had two years in a row now of record low birth rates in the US, below replacement level. So the [00:09:30] idea that people aren't working on this question at best, I think it could be argued that nobody's making it a big enough priority. But really, it

feels to me like this just comes down to why aren't people still using the word overpopulation?

Michelle Nijhuis: [00:09:42] Yeah, I mean, it goes back to those, those emails that that you and I often get that in so many words say, gotcha. You know, you haven't used the word population, therefore you're avoiding the issue.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:09:54] This is Michelle Nijhuis, a journalist out West who has gotten the same kind of emails that I always get. [00:10:00] She's actually writing a book right now about the history of the conservation movement.

Michelle Nijhuis: [00:10:03] It kind of reminds me of the fight that the Trump campaign had, where they were trying to shame the Obama administration for not using the words radical Islamic terrorism.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:10:14] Michelle says environmental groups know about the history with population that we laid out in the last episode, and they're just being a little more sensitive. They say.

Michelle Nijhuis: [00:10:23] You know, we're not using those words for a reason. We're not using those words because we don't want to alienate people who [00:10:30] very much want to help us.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:10:33] Remember last episode in the early 90s at the UN conference on the Environment in Rio, environmentalists were forced to reckon with the coercive population programs that had resulted from the doomist rhetoric of the 60s and 70s. And then, as they're trying to be more careful around this issue in the late 90s and the early aughts, along comes Ben Zuckerman, who's mounting a campaign to get the Sierra Club to weigh in on what he sees as the big problem, [00:11:00] specifically US population growth fueled by immigrants.

Ben Zuckerman: [00:11:05] Thankfully, the fertility rate has come down. To replacement level were somewhat below, but because there's so much immigration from abroad, the US population still continues to grow rapidly.

Justine Paradis: [00:11:24] I just, I don't understand why our immigration and population the same topic?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:11:28] Yeah. I mean, there are two pieces. One [00:11:30] of the things that he says is, hey, I'm an American and I can only affect American policies.

Justine Paradis: [00:11:36] But I guess even besides, like the racial elements of this discussion, how are you addressing population by addressing immigration? Like population is a global problem. Where does it matter where the people are?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:11:47] And and not only that, like if people move to America and sort of become part of the American economy, the forces of demographic transition will probably mean they'll have fewer babies.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:11:56] Exactly.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:11:57] Which is what we've seen. So Hispanic birth rates are the fastest [00:12:00] to fall in the US. There's like a 26% drop in Hispanic birth rates over the last ten years, faster than any other demographic group. But the second piece is about the different impact that members of different economies have. So he says, we already consume too much. We have the highest per capita carbon emissions. We eat more meat than any other country in the world. So it's like they're already too many Americans. And and maybe we should just have fewer Americans.

Justine Paradis: [00:12:26] Um, fair.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:12:27] Yeah. Why not? The problem [00:12:30] with that is, though, is like it it cements in place the inequality that already exists everywhere else. Like, assuming this is a solution to human impact, is also assuming that the rest of the world is never going to achieve our level of affluence.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:12:44] Yeah, right. And I think, I think Ben would say that he believes Americans do need to consume less, but generally he agrees that the rest of the world can't consume like we do.

Ben Zuckerman: [00:12:53] I mean, if China ever achieves the same per capita level of affluence as the United States does, the whole biosphere will be [00:13:00] destroyed. Because there are four times as many people in China as there are in the United States. So there is no way that these other countries can ever come up to the level of affluence of the United States.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:13:18] Maybe you agree with Ben. Or maybe you think that asserting that poor people all over the world can't have what we have is just another problematic position in a long line of problematic positions? [00:13:30] Either way, when Ben Zuckerman first launched his insurgent campaign against the Sierra Club establishment, members of the Sierra Club were sympathetic to his ideas. And in 2002, when he first ran for the board, he was the top vote getter.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:13:43] This guy?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:13:43] Yes. And then the next year, two others made it onto the board, who were supported by the Sierra for US Population Stabilization. SUPS. If you want to shorten it. One of them was a guy named Paul Watson, who's kind of famous. Did you ever hear about Whale Wars? Animal [00:14:00] Planet show?

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:14:02] Do you have a clip for us?

Paul Watson show: [00:14:03] That stands for everything I hate. Killing innocent animals. It's up to us to stop them.

Justine Paradis: [00:14:11] Is this like a Greenpeace thing?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:14:13] So Paul Watson was a co-founder of Greenpeace, but left because it wasn't extreme enough. They were not willing to go far enough in his mind.

Justine Paradis: [00:14:21] Okay.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:14:21] I interviewed Paul as well, and my takeaway was this crew wasn't some sleeper cell organized from above by a mastermind in UCLA.

[00:14:30] Paul says that he decided to run for the board after debate that he had on stage with Carl Pope, who was the head of the Sierra Club at the time.

Paul Watson: [00:14:38] A question was asked, you know, how can one person make a difference? And Carl said, well, all we really have to do is talk to our neighbor. If everybody just talk to our neighbor, that would change things in the world. And I remember saying, what am I up on the stage here with Mr. Rogers or something? You know? It's not that simple.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:14:57] But it sounds like though you wanted to run on your own [00:15:00] volition. So this idea that Ben was like, you know, in charge of some sort of movement is maybe an oversimplification.

Paul Watson: [00:15:07] No, Ben wasn't in charge of any movement. He was representing a position. You know, we had support for that position from numerous people.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:15:15] And according to both Ben and Paul, there were a lot of folks who supported them. So David Brower founded the anti-nuclear group Friends of the Earth. Gaylord Nelson organized the first Earth Day. Stewart Udall. E.O. Wilson. This list actually [00:15:30] goes on for a really long time.

Justine Paradis: [00:15:31] Well, they're like. Well, they're kind of big. These are all big names.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:15:34] Yeah, I've heard I've heard of those people.

Justine Paradis: [00:15:35] Yeah.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:15:36] And this position, plain and simple, according to these two, is that if you want to stabilize the US population, you have to deal with immigration.

Paul Watson: [00:15:42] The focus was not on immigration alone. The focus was right across the board on ways to deal with this. Immigration was just one of the issues. But think what the bottom line was this that the US should come up with a policy that would

maintain population stabilization. [00:16:00] So it wouldn't grow. And whatever contributed to the increase was what was to be addressed. Nobody was saying, shut the borders and not allow any immigrants to come in. I mean, what we're saying is that the immigration should be consistent with keeping stabilization.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:16:16] It is worth noting that these guys also believe that the Sierra Club was in the pocket of neoliberal capitalists on this issue. This West Coast hedge fund billionaire had given \$100 million to the club around this same time, and it later came out that he told the [00:16:30] club that they'd never get a penny from him if they voted to oppose immigration. So as the 2004 board election rolls around, there are three Sierrans for US population Stabilization backed candidates on the board already, and another three endorsed candidates were running. If all six of them made it on to the 15 person board, they would have been able to make a coalition with some other Sierra Club malcontents that were already on the board and make a majority. They would have been able to overrule the Sierra Club establishment.

Ben Zuckerman: [00:16:57] Well, this completely terrified the establishment. [00:17:00] They pulled out all stops to destroy us.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:17:04] We'll hear that story after the break.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:17:15] So as we're coming into the 2004 Sierra Club board election, that's when Heidi Burack with the Southern Poverty Law Center enters the story. She had been monitoring this publication, called The Social Contract, because it's published by someone named John Tanton. [00:17:30] Heidi had been following him for years because of his close ties with overtly racist people, and she noticed these ads in the Social Contract, urging the readers to join the Sierra Club to support Ben Zuckerman and the candidates he was endorsing. So when Heidi sees these ads, she's like a racists are being told to join the Sierra Club and vote for these candidates. This seems like some sort of coordinated racist takeover.

Heidi Beirich: [00:17:54] Nobody in the Sierra Club seems to understand that this is even happening, right? It was almost like a sleeper campaign, and this was [00:18:00] obviously far before, you know, you had the Twitter and you had Facebook and all these kinds of things where you could make a stink over something. So we were using more

traditional means, like reaching out to the press. And we did something that we've we'd never done before and haven't done since, which was to have our co-founder, Morris Dees, run for the Sierra Club board. You know, we had to scramble to get him on the ballot. And if I'm remembering correctly, he was allowed to make about a 300 word statement in this pamphlet that everybody who's a member of the Sierra [00:18:30] Club gets. And what we did was, you know, Morris basically said, "Don't vote for me, right. I don't want to be on the board of the Sierra Club. I'm no expert on environmentalism, but don't vote for these other people."

Justine Paradis: [00:18:43] The Southern Poverty Law Center planted a candidate?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:18:46] To use the candidate statement to try to discredit these other candidates.

Justine Paradis: [00:18:52] That is bonkers.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:18:52] This story is wild.

Justine Paradis: [00:18:53] So is this really a racist takeover of the Sierra Club?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:18:59] Well, all three of these candidates [00:19:00] were in favor of somehow limiting immigration to the United States, but all of them took great offense in the press when they were painted with the same brush as these blogs and newsletters that were promoting their cause. And as Ben points out, they had some serious pedigree.

Ben Zuckerman: [00:19:14] Here's something that amazed me, Sam, about the 2004 election. Here. The Sierra Club membership had a chance to have on the board of directors, a three time Democratic governor of the state of Colorado. [00:19:30]

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:19:30] A guy named Richard Lamm.

Ben Zuckerman: [00:19:31] Frank Morris, a African-American leader in Congress.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:19:37] Co-founder of the Congressional Black Caucus.

Ben Zuckerman: [00:19:39] And David Pimentel, one of the outstanding agricultural scientists in the United States, a professor at Cornell University. These three gentlemen were all willing to spend the time at some of these interminable Sierra Club board meetings in order to try and help the Sierra Club be more effective, [00:20:00] and they got completely demonized and slandered.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:20:03] This move by the SPLC resulted in a lot of press coverage, and unsurprisingly, Ben Zuckerman was absolutely infuriated and still is.

Ben Zuckerman: [00:20:12] Sam, it's unfortunate that you even mentioned the Southern Poverty Law Center. They are a political organization that has own agenda.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:20:23] He completely denies that there's any sort of conspiracy.

Ben Zuckerman: [00:20:26] Your mention of John Tanton and the [00:20:30] Sierra Club is a perfect example of how they distort the truth. John Tanton had nothing to do with SUPS. He never was a member of SUPS. For all I know, he was not even a member of the Sierra Club during the decade or so that Sus was active.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:20:50] I have to say I do believe him when he says that there isn't any conspiracy. The idea that some UCLA professor was able to pull together a [00:21:00] co-founder of the Congressional Black Caucus and the Whale Wars guy just doesn't seem credible. It seems much more likely to me that this anti-immigrant John Tanton saw something that he liked that was happening and jumped on the bandwagon. And and this part is really hard because I didn't talk to all the candidates who ran, and I don't want to paint them with one brush, but you can see how some of their rhetoric could attract people like John Tanton. I want to play you one piece of tape. And this is from Richard Lamm, who was the former governor of Colorado, [00:21:30] Democrat. He gave this speech that you're about to hear in 2003 before the election, but it didn't become public until after the election.

Richard Lamm: [00:21:37] I would like to share with you my plan to destroy America. Number one, I'd make it a bilingual, bicultural country. History shows us that no

bilingual, bicultural country lives at peace with itself. My second part of my plan would be to invent something called multiculturalism. Those would be two parts. Number one, I would say that all cultures are created equal. [00:22:00] It wouldn't be make no difference and make it impossible to talk about such things as culture. And the second one is that I would really try very hard to make people continue their cultural identity. I would replace the melting pot with the salad bowl.

Justine Paradis: [00:22:17] Wait, so. So this guy was running for the board of the Sierra Club?

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:22:22] That is crazy.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:22:24] Well, in particular, because it's factually wrong, right? Like, let's Google some some bilingual countries [00:22:30] like Luxembourg, Switzerland, Singapore, like, these are places that are doing fine.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:22:35] The US.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:22:37] Right, the US, Canada.

Justine Paradis: [00:22:39] How does Ben Zuckerman feel about being on the same slate as this, this person?

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:22:44] Well, I'd say, Ben, like this type of rhetoric isn't his cup of tea, but...

Ben Zuckerman: [00:22:50] But here's here's one of my basic philosophies of life, which I think applies in this case. One should not stop doing the right [00:23:00] thing for the right reasons, just because somebody else is doing the right thing for the wrong reasons. And if there are some racists or whatnot who are who are against immigration because they don't want more people of color coming to the United States, there's nothing at all I can do about that.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:23:33] So [00:23:30] what I've been trying to do in these episodes is show that debates don't occur in a cultural or historical vacuum. Whatever

Ben's reasons for wanting to limit immigration or talk about population more generally, leave those aside. But the decision to focus on this subject does come with this incredible baggage that you just can't ignore. And I'm also trying to argue that for the environmental [00:24:00] movement, this vote in the Sierra Club, it signals a turn towards a moment of reckoning. Are we going to finally face this history? For instance, we talked about the forced sterilizations in the 70s in the last episode. But really, it goes way deeper than that. And to be clear, again, there have been racist people all over American society. So it's not like these early conservationists you're going to hear about were the only bigots. But there were some real standouts.

Michelle Nijhuis: [00:24:28] Madison Grant may [00:24:30] be the most notorious example. He helped found the Bronx Zoo, and he also was a was an important member of the Save the Redwoods League in California. You know, he wrote a book called The Passing of the Great Race, which Hitler praised as his quote unquote, Bible.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:24:48] Oh my gosh.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:24:49] That's Michelle Nijhuis again. She actually covered this battle at the Sierra Club as a journalist. There was also a guy named William Vogt whose book, The Road to Survival, was this pre-Population [00:25:00] Bomb, Malthusian text that advocated for eugenics as a solution to the alleged overpopulation problem.

Michelle Nijhuis: [00:25:06] So there have been these associations and it's and sometimes much more than associations. There have been very tight connections between conservation of other species and racism.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:25:22] These characters have intermittently been used by opponents to discredit environmentalists like, hey, look at these people who are foundational to American environmentalism. [00:25:30] You don't want to be associated with them, right? The Misanthropes, the Nazis, Hitler.

Michelle Nijhuis: [00:25:36] When this controversy erupted within the Sierra Club, you know, the Sierra Club was quite understandably concerned about reawakening that stereotype of environmentalists as being anti human. And then I'm sure that they were

at some level aware of this history of racism within the conservation movement and aware that they [00:26:00] had made, you know, very sincere, I think, efforts to distance themselves from that history.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:26:05] So environmentalism is trying to represent all air breathers and water drinkers, but it sort of handicapped by its roots and its it's just recently come off being called out for having huge blind spots when talking about population control through the 70s and 80s. And now you've got a group of people running for the board of one of the country's oldest, biggest environmental nonprofits, people who want to limit immigration and who are attracting the support of some racist, anti-immigrant [00:26:30] newsletters and websites. What kind of reception do you think they'd get?

Michelle Nijhuis: [00:26:34] And the Sierra Club actually ended up putting a notice on the ballot that they sent out to members saying, you know, warning them that outside groups were trying to manipulate their opinion on this issue and were trying to manipulate the vote.

Heidi Beirich: [00:26:49] Well, Morris Dees was not elected to the board. And the candidates, the three candidates did not get elected either.

Michelle Nijhuis: [00:26:58] Yeah, they were defeated by quite a [00:27:00] large margin.

Heidi Beirich: [00:27:01] And they sued. Actually, those three candidates sued, saying that they were sort of submarined by the, Morris running for for a position and so on. That suit just ultimately went nowhere.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:27:19] So the mutiny was basically over. The next year, in 2005, the Sierra for US Population Stabilization crew that was already on the board, got the Sierra Club to vote on a different resolution [00:27:30] in favor of limiting immigration. But it too was soundly defeated. And so they finished out their terms or resigned. And that was that.

Justine Paradis: [00:27:37] All right. But you said at the beginning that this whole debate kind of represents a real shift in the capital E Environmentalism of the 70s versus now.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:27:47] Yes. And to prove that point, I called up.

Bill McKibben: [00:27:50] And at this point, black people in [clatter] I just dropped this phone. Hold [00:28:00] it up near enough....

Justine Paradis: [00:28:02] I like this person already.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:28:06] Bill McKibben.

Justine Paradis: [00:28:10] Eyyy!

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:28:10] He recorded himself on his iPhone and sent me the audio. It just felt like we need some comic relief in there.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:28:16] Appreciate it. Oh my God.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:28:18] So, Bill McKibben, cross-country ski enthusiast, wrote End of Nature, first, first book for regular folks about global warming. And he founded this climate change advocacy group, 350.org. But [00:28:30] also at the time of this Sierra Club battle, he wrote an article that said, you know, this Ben Zuckerman guy, at least he's got us talking about population again.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:28:39] Bill!

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:28:41] Did you did you go back and read the piece that you wrote in?

Bill McKibben: [00:28:44] Mhm.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:28:44] How did you feel about that when you read it over?

Bill McKibben: [00:28:46] I think I felt queasy about it. I think it made me feel sad because it was clear to me that myself, and probably a large number of other people, understood then [00:29:00] immigrants as simply a kind of abstract numerical quantity.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:29:05] Bill says he wrote this piece because he's friends with Ben's sister Ellen, the one that he mentioned at the beginning who was a Freedom Rider in the Civil Rights era.

Bill McKibben: [00:29:12] And Ellen called and said, my brother is not a racist. Would you say so? So I wrote what I wrote and promptly forgot about it. And I think everyone, as far as I can tell, no one actually read the piece either.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:29:25] And I think Bill kind of perfectly shows how environmentalism [00:29:30] is changing politically. So in 1999, he wrote this book called *Maybe One*, in which he talks about human impact associated with population growth, especially population growth in affluent countries. And maybe because of that, you should just have one kid in 2004. Even though this wasn't his idea initially, he was willing to write this piece about the battle for the Sierra Club, but now he's involved with 350.org, which is a very progressive organization that talks a lot about the disproportionate [00:30:00] impact that climate change has on poor people, people of color, people from third world countries. They're trying to pivot away from environmentalism's upper class European American beginnings, trying to embrace the lessons from the environmental justice movement, trying to be more inclusive.

Bill McKibben: [00:30:17] The old stereotype of environmentalists is that they're affluent white people. At this point, the best environmentalists in America are people of color and, above all, Hispanic Americans. [00:30:30] Every bit of polling shows that who cares about climate change? And not surprisingly, because that's who gets hammered first by climate change.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:30:39] The Sierra Club, when I called them about this story, they didn't want to talk about it. They didn't provide me with anyone to do an interview, but they did send me all of these articles and blog posts about work they're doing on gender equity and to help immigrants. All of these materials that show how they're trying to be good members of the Progressive Coalition, which is a move that I think a lot of

environmental groups are either [00:31:00] making or pondering right now. And also in general, you see a lot of scholars and writers really wrestling with the problematic roots of their movement. I think as a whole, it's just a move away from the sort of, hey, don't blame me, I'm just doing the numbers and the numbers don't lie approach.

Bill McKibben: [00:31:18] I think the point is that doing the whole thing as a math problem just is stupid. I mean, I think it's like trying to solve climate change by, you know, each person [00:31:30] one by one, installing new light bulbs or something. What's needed is systemic change and that change in the direction of human solidarity.

Michelle Nijhuis: [00:31:41] The environmental movement, in order to have the effect that it wants to have in order to attract, you know, the number of people that it needs to attract in order for its ideas to prevail. It has to be pro-environment, and it has to be pro-human. It can be anti excessive human footprint, [00:32:00] but it can't be anti-human.

Jimmy Gutierrez: [00:32:02] Can I just take a moment to say, I don't know if this is going to get in, but just the fact like that we've been, we've and we're guilty of it too, is that we spent so much time talking about the equation in the first episode, right? And then for him to humanize it, talking about these are actual people, not a part of a numerical equation like is something that was, I don't think, like explicitly stated by anyone yet, which is like really [00:32:30] troubling. I do appreciate the fact that that someone has used humanizing language.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:32:36] Yeah.

Justine Paradis: [00:32:36] Yeah.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:32:49] Have you heard the term carrying capacity? Carrying capacity is how many organisms a given habitat can support. You hear it a lot in reference to species that we hunt like [00:33:00] deer and beaver and the like, and it's something that population scholars of all stripes have been trying to calculate for the number of humans on planet Earth for more than 100 years. And just as I was poking around looking for info for this story there. There are six papers that say the Earth can support only 2 billion people or fewer. So we're already over. And there are five that say we can support more than 100 billion people on the planet. So they're all over the map.

Joel Cohen: [00:33:27] People have used carrying capacity [00:33:30] as a political number.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:33:32] This is Joel Cohen, a demographer at Rockefeller University.

Joel Cohen: [00:33:35] The problem is a problem of poetry. The whole notion of carrying capacity is borrowed from wildlife management. But people are not wildlife. People change their interactions with the environment through knowledge and through their institutions and through their cultures.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:33:55] Joel thinks that it's impossible to figure out what the carrying capacity of Earth is, [00:34:00] unlike wildlife. We adapt, we innovate, we come up with solutions to our problems. And because of that, so far, every Malthusian prediction that has been made has been bested by our cleverness. But for now, the environmental movement seems to have settled on the fact that because of all of this history, it's very problematic to be anti human population. But it's still reasonable to be anti human impact. And so they focused on the ways that we can try to decouple [00:34:30] the scale of our impacts from the number of us out there. We can change our agriculture and our homes to use less land. We can change how we eat and how we make energy so as not to cook ourselves. But if that is our strategy, things really do have to change.

Joel Cohen: [00:34:45] I think it was Eisenhower who said: it's absolutely essential to plan and plans never work. But there is a world outside of human will. There is a, [00:35:00] an earth with oceans and crusts and atmospheres. And we can modify the atmosphere. We've done it. And we can raise the temperature, increase the acidity, and pollute the oceans. We're doing it. But if the ocean's warm water expands, that's a law of nature. And if [00:35:30] the ice in Antarctica and Greenland melts, the oceans are going to go up some more. This is the only place we've got to live, and we're not paying enough attention to the constraints on human wants imposed by the reality of the world we live in.

Sam Evans-Brown: [00:36:17] Outside/In [00:36:00] was produced this week by me, Sam Evans-Brown, with help from Hannah McCarthy, Justine Paradis, Taylor Quimby, and Jimmy Gutierrez. Erika Janik is our executive producer. Maureen McMurray is the director of Endangered Species Condoms as fun drive premiums. [00:36:30] Special thanks to NJPR's Josh Rogers, who was the voice of Thomas Malthus in the last episode and who I forgot to thank. And to everyone who spoke to me for this story, it's obviously a fraught topic. If you have thoughts or opinions about our treatment of this subject, we want to hear from you. You can typically find a lively discussion on our Facebook group. That's the one that you have to request permission to join. And of course you can at us on Twitter. I'm @SamEBNHPR [note: now @SamEBEnergy] and the whole crew is @outsideinradio. [00:37:00] Music in this episode by Blue Dot Sessions and Podington bear. Our theme music is by Breakmaster Cylinder. Outside/In is a production of New Hampshire Public Radio.