

AUDUBON ON THE WORLD STAGE:  
INTERNATIONAL FAMILY PLANNING AND RESOURCE MANAGEMENT  
By Ruth Ann Wiesenthal-Gold

Did you know that the National Audubon Society is about people as well as birds and wildlife? I didn't. Then one day last August I received an email about an Audubon-sponsored trip to Ethiopia. With that email began an odyssey that continues to this day, an adventure I shared with Audubon to help developing countries control their population growth while also working to engage developed countries like the US in the effort.

It makes sense. Birds, wildlife and people are all the same in needing a place to live. One of the greatest adverse impacts on these habitats, however, is human population.

Under the UN's "medium scenario", human population is projected to reach nearly 9.2 billion by the year 2050— up from 6.7 billion today. If today's fertility rate remains constant, world population in 2050 could reach as high as 11.9 billion. The environmental challenges we face in this century and beyond will become harder to address as the number of people increase. And the overwhelming majority of this growth will occur in the developing world.

As a result of that fateful August email, I was fortunate to travel last November with a small group of activists and staff from the National Audubon Society and the Sierra Club on a 10-day study tour to Ethiopia, where we saw first-hand the problems of rapid population growth. Our primary purpose was to attend the International Population, Health, and Environment (PHE) Conference held at the United Nations Center in Ethiopia's capital, Addis Ababa. We joined hundreds of development professionals there, including many from Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, and Ethiopia. Among my duties on this trip was to participate in a workshop at the conference, talking about successful advocacy. I shared my experiences with people who had survived genocide, who had fought each day just to survive, and who still remain positive and hopeful enough to want to learn more about what they could do to better their country. The workshop was profoundly humbling.

Ethiopia is a stunning country. It is full of stark natural contrasts and even more dramatic social issues. The people are warm and loving and inviting. But in Ethiopia, as in many developing and undeveloped countries around the world, rapid population growth has put a huge strain on the environment. Ethiopia has one of the highest fertility levels in the world. With 77 million people, 40% of whom are in their reproductive years, it is the second-largest country in Africa. Population has doubled twice since 1950 and is projected to double again in the next 20 years: this trend is alarming. Eighty percent of Ethiopians subsist on climate-dependent agriculture. Population growth has accelerated land degradation, as forests are converted to farms and pastures, and households use unsustainable agricultural methods to eke out a living on marginal land. Once the most forested country in Africa, Ethiopia now retains only 2% of its forests.

Sounds a bit daunting, doesn't it? It is easy to feel overwhelmed or depressed about the numbers, but the innovative, three-pronged PHE programs offer rays of hope. Over the years, PHE staff have found that taking this holistic approach addresses community concerns, helps avoid the unintended consequences of focusing on only one area, and yields greater success.

The family-planning component of the healthcare is critical. An average Ethiopian woman will have 5.4 children. One in three married women want voluntary family planning services, but lack access. Currently, only 31% of the demand for education and prevention methods is being met. The

connection with education is clear. Fertility decreases as educational levels increase. Uneducated mothers have three times as many children as women with some secondary education (6.1 as opposed to 2.1 children). These statistics are representative for many developing countries.

During the group's trips through the countryside, we traveled to remote villages where PHE programs, some in partnership with USAID, some locally sponsored, were being carried out. We visited communities that were planting tree seedlings; we met with health workers who are being trained to help educate both men and women on reproductive health and population issues; we found local officials who were sending more girls to school so they could have better economic opportunities. We recognized how family planning is a necessary part of a development package that can foster community well-being in the short term and ease pressure on natural resources in the long term.

What our group witnessed on this trip changed most of our lives. No one can look into the faces of people who have survived such challenges and not be changed. We saw firsthand how communities struggle to survive on depleted land, with little access to basics like sanitation, clean water, and health care. We saw children, men, and women ~ many elderly ~ who have survived dire circumstances and remain happy and smiling and more generous than we could possibly imagine. Time and again we were invited into homes and offered food. We knew that if we did not accept we would hurt our host's or hostess' feelings, and yet we also knew we were literally taking food out of their mouths. It made me stop to wonder how Americans would act in the same situation -- how I would act. I'm still wondering. That kind of situation isn't easy for many Americans to grasp, much less handle graciously. What I do know is I must help as much as I can, and try to get others to help as well.

As a follow-up to the trip, I and other representatives from Audubon, Sierra Club and the Izaak Walton League met in Washington during June to ask legislators for more money on behalf of international family planning. Florida's US senators both supported our efforts and, indeed, shortly after our visit, put their money where their mouths are: they are helping us make increased funding for international family planning a reality. By encouraging them through our calls, e-mails, and perhaps a visit or two, we can each further the cause. Actually, it is something all of us must do. Get involved, get informed and get in touch with your senators and congressmen. For more information about Audubon and Population, visit <http://www.audubonpopulation.org/>. When we are informed, we can be more effective. And with that, we can protect the future.

*Ruth Ann Wiesenthal-Gold, of Palm Bay has been a public welfare activist, and volunteer (board of directors of her Miami synagogue, member of Child Assault Prevention, officer of the court in California working to protect abused children, board of directors of Coalition for the Permanent Protection of Kelda Lands [protecting water lands], worker for 25 years at MDA telethon). Retired from working as a therapist with drug addicts and alcoholics, she has provided leadership on a number of issues, from helping open the first women-only homeless shelter in Atlanta to helping protect abused children in South Florida and California. Before coming to Florida from Connecticut, Ruth Ann co-founded the Woodlands Coalition for Responsible Energy. Under her guidance, what began as 10 people in a friend's living room evolved into a grassroots advocacy organization with hundreds and then thousands of members and a statewide reputation for fact-based expertise on energy policy.*