

## The Island of Plenty

*Johnson C. Montgomery was a California attorney and an early member of the Zero Population Growth organization. Born in 1934, Montgomery attended Harvard University and the Stanford University Law School; he was admitted to the California bar in 1960. "The Island of Plenty," in his own words, is an "elitist" argument in favor of American social isolationism. Until we have enough food to feed ourselves, he says, we owe it to future generations not to share our material resources with other countries of the world.*

The United States should remain an island of plenty in a sea of hunger. The future of mankind is at stake. We are not responsible for the rest of humanity. We should not accept responsibility for all humanity. We owe more to the hundreds of billions of Homo futurans than we do to the hungry millions—soon to be billions—of our own generation.

Ample food and resources exist to nourish man and all other creatures indefinitely into the future. This planet is in deed an Eden—to date our only Eden. Admittedly our Eden is plagued by pollution. Some of us have polluted the planet by reproducing too many of us. Too many people have made excessive demands on the long-range carrying capacity of our garden; and during the last 200 years there has been dramatic, ever-increasing destruction of the web of life on earth. If we try to save the starving millions today, we will simply destroy what's left of Eden.

The problem is not that there is too little food. The problem is there are too many people—many too many. It is not that the children should never have been born. It is simply that we have mindlessly tried to cram too many of us into too short a time span. Four billion humans are fine—but they should have been spread over several hundred years.

But the billions are already here. What should we do about them? Should we send food, knowing that each child saved in Southeast Asia, India or Africa will probably live to reproduce and thereby bring more people into the world to live even more miserably? Should we eat the last tuna fish, the last ear of corn and utterly destroy the garden? That is what we have been doing for a long time and all the misguided efforts have merely increased the number who go to bed hungry each night. There have never been more miserable, deprived people in the world than there are right now.

It was obvious even in the late 1950s that the famine the world now faces was coming unless people immediately began exercising responsibility for reducing population levels. It was also obvious that too many people contributed to the risk of nuclear war, global pestilence, illiteracy and even to many problems that are usually classified as purely economic. For example, unemployment is having too many people for the available jobs. Inflation is in part the result of too much demand from too many people. But in the 1960s population control was taboo and those who warned of impending disasters received a cool reception.

By the time Zero Population Growth, Inc., was formed, those of us who wanted to do something useful decided to concentrate our initial efforts on our own families and

friends and then on the white American middle and upper classes. Our belief was that by setting an example, we could later insist that others pay attention to our proposals.

I think I was the first in the original ZPG group to have had a vasectomy. Nancy and I had two children—each doing superbly well and each getting all the advantages of the best nutrition, education, attention, love and other resources available. I think Paul Ehrlich 1 (one child) was the next. Now don't ask me to cut my children back to the same number of calories that Children from large families eat. In fact, don't ask me to cut my Children back on anything. I won't do it without a fight; and in today's world, power is in knowledge, not numbers. Nancy and I made a Conscious decision to limit the number of our children so each child could have a larger share of whatever we could make available. We intend to keep the best for them.

The future of mankind is indeed with the children. But it is with the nourished, educated and loved children. It is not with the starving, uneducated and ignored. This is of course a highly elitist point of view. But that doesn't make the view incorrect. As a matter of fact, the lowest reproductive rate in the nation is that of one of the most elite groups in the world—black, female Ph.D.'s. They had to be smart and effective to make it. Having made it, they are smart enough not to wreck it w too many kids.

We in the United States have made great progress in lowering our birth rates. But now, because we have been responsible, it seems to some that we have a great surplus. There is, indeed, waste that should be eliminated, but there is not as much fat in our system as most people think. Yet we are being asked to share our resources with the hungry peoples of the world. But why should we share? The nations having the greatest needs are those that have been the least responsible in cutting down on births. Famine is one of nature's ways of telling profligate peoples that they have been irresponsible in their breeding habits.

Naturally, we would like to help; and if we could, perhaps we should. But we can't be of any use in the long run—particularly if we weaken ourselves.

Until we have at least a couple of years' supply of food and other resources on hand to take care of our own people and until those asking for handouts are doing at least as well as we are at reducing existing excessive population-growth rates, we should not give away our resources—not so much as one bushel of wheat. Certainly we should not participate in any programs that will in crease the burden that mankind is already placing on the earth. We should not deplete our own soils to save those who will only die equally miserably a decade or so down the line—and in many cases only after reproducing more children who are inevitably doomed to live and die in misery.

We know the world is finite. There is only so much pie. We may be able to expand the pie, but at any point in time, the pie is finite. How big a piece each person gets depends in part on how many people there are. At least for the foreseeable future, the fewer of us there are, the more there will be for each. That is true on a family, community, state, national and global basis.

At the moment, the future of mankind seems to depend on our maintaining the island of plenty in a sea of deprivation. If every one shared equally, we would all be suffering from

protein-deficiency brain damage—and that would probably be true even if we ate every last animal on earth.

As compassionate human beings, we grieve for the condition of mankind. But our grief must not interfere with our perception of reality and our planning for a better future for those who will come after us. Someone must protect the material and intellectual seed grain for the future. It seems to me that that someone is the U.S. We owe it to our children—and to their children’s children’s children’s children.

These conclusions will be attacked, as they have been within Zero Population Growth, as simplistic and inhumane. But truth is often very simple and reality often inhumane.

## **QUESTIONS**

### ***Understanding***

1. What is Montgomery’s main proposition in this essay? In which two paragraphs is it stated most directly?
2. What other general propositions does he put forth in support of his main proposition?
3. in paragraph 4, what is the last sentence (about the number of miserable people in the world) intended to prove?
4. Montgomery warns us not to “ask me to cut my children back on anything” (par. 7). How is this position consistent with what he says about the planet’s not having enough to go around?

### ***Strategies and Structure***

1. The logic of Montgomery’s basic ARGUMENT can be represented by a syllogism. Major premise: To provide undamaged human stock for the future, some people must remain healthy. Minor premise: All will suffer if all share equally in the world’s limited bounty. Conclusion: Some must not share what they have. How sound is this logic? Will you grant Montgomery’s premises? Why or why not?
2. Montgomery’s hard-headed realism would show us the “truth” (par. 15) of the human condition; but it would also move us to action. What would Montgomery have us do?
3. Logic is only part of Montgomery’s persuasive arsenal. Which paragraphs in his essay appeal more to emotion and ethics than to logic?
4. Montgomery seems to be speaking from authority. Where does he get his authority, and how much weight should it carry?
5. Montgomery admits that his position is “elitist” (par. 8). How does he head off the charge that it is racist?
6. Is Montgomery’s last paragraph necessary? Why or why not?
7. Are you persuaded by Montgomery’s essay? Why or why not?

### **Words and Figures of Speech**

1. How does the METAPHOR of the island contribute to Montgomery’s argument? Is there any IRONY in his title?

2. For the sake of the future, says Montgomery, we must save some “material and intellectual seed grain” (par. 14). Explain this metaphor: What is being compared to what? Why is the metaphor appropriate?
3. How is Montgomery altering the traditional definition of Eden? Is he rejecting the traditional idea altogether? Explain your answer.
4. Homo futurans (par. i), meaning “man of the future,” is modeled after such scientific terms as Homo erectus (“upright man”) and Homo sapiens (“thinking man”). Why might Montgomery choose to use the language of science at the beginning of his argument?
- g. How does Montgomery’s use of the word mindlessly (par. 3) fit in with his entire argument?
6. What is the meaning of profligate (par. 9)?

### ***Comparing***

1. By comparison with William F. Buckley’s “Capital Punishment,” does “The Island of Plenty” seem more concerned with analyzing a condition or with persuading the reader to act? Explain.
2. Opponents of Montgomery’s argument might charge that he has written “a modest proposal.” What would they mean by this? Would they be justified? (See Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” in “Essays For Further Reading.”)

### ***Discussion and Writing Topics***

1. Attack Montgomery’s position on the grounds that he is confusing compassion with weakness.
2. Defend Montgomery’s assertion that “there is not as much fat in our system as most people think” (par. 9).
3. Write your own “modest proposal” (for feeding the world, curing inflation, regulating human breeding habits, or some other “simple” task).