

Town Crier VI: A close shave with Occam's Razor

By Pete Haug | Posted: Wednesday, April 27, 2016 12:00 am

Occam's Razor comes in many models, some sharper than others. Basically it's an aphorism tweaked by a number of philosophers dating from Aristotle: "The simplest explanation is usually the best."

For example, climate change is simple. Two things drive it: population and energy. All else links back to these two drivers.

In the mid-1930s, world population was estimated at 2.2 billion. Current estimate is 7.3 billion. Simple math reveals a 330 percent increase in 80 years; current projections are for 11 billion by the end of this century.

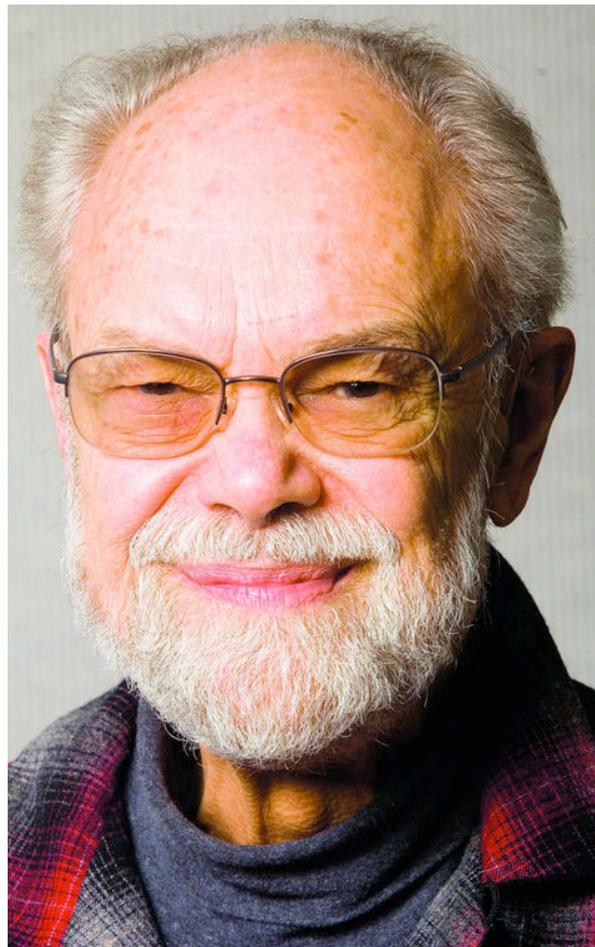
Where are the resources to feed, clothe, house and otherwise support these folks? The answer lies in energy required to grow food, manufacture goods, construct buildings, transport people, provide health care and so on.

Ironically, energy is partly to blame for our burgeoning population. Had energy not been cheap, we'd have fewer people. Instead we have more people requiring more energy.

Climate change was first identified as global warming produced by fossil fuels shortly after the industrial revolution began. The interlinked problems associated with energy-based industrialization, agriculturization, resource depletion, environmental pollution and greenhouse gases all stem from demands of a growing population.

China understood this in 1980 when, to protect itself, it instituted a draconian one-child policy. Besides causing untold human suffering for four decades, that failed policy is now reaping a whirlwind.

Population control depends primarily on women, not government. Willingly or not, women bear the brunt of burgeoning populations. Even at conception, man's contribution is tiny; after fertilization, everything depends on the woman.



Peter Haug

Peter Haug

So why not empower women to choose wisely, to control decisions about their childbearing? Our highly educated Western world still prevents women from rising to their potential; how much more repressive to women are less “developed” societies.

Educated women are better equipped to control their lives. Women should be educated because they are the first educators of their children. It follows that girls should receive priority over boys for their education if schooling everyone is impossible.

Studies demonstrate the longer girls are schooled, the fewer children they have. A 2014 article on giving women choice and control observed that the underlying cause of high fertility rates in less-developed countries is “the lack of empowerment of women and girls to exercise choice and control over their fertility.”

It's simple. Besides bringing world population under control, educating women is a no-brainer for reasons too numerous to explore here.

Less simple is the Gordian knot posed by our addiction to energy. The problem is solvable but, like population, is subject to national, political, religious and other volatile forces that militate against a solution.

Modern agriculture depends on fossil resources for fertilizers, pesticides, machinery and transportation. Food production comprises 17 percent of total U.S. fossil fuel use. Our meat-based society requires, on average, 25 fossil fuel Calories to produce a single Calorie of meat, at ratios ranging from 4-to-1 for broilers and up to 57-to-1 for lamb.

Pollution is another example. Fossil energy produces residue not only as emissions, but also as petroleum-based, non-biodegradable plastics and non-recyclable trash.

So what can we do? How can we mobilize individuals, organizations and nations to wean themselves, with minimal economic impact, from this addiction?

Last week 250 faith leaders called on nations to ratify last December's Climate Change Agreement; on Earth Day, 175 governments signed it to begin the ratification process.

Religious organizations from disparate faiths, philanthropic foundations, international agencies, entrepreneurs and grassroots individuals are already addressing this problem. If we can conquer the zero-sum mentality common in our society and learn to work together, there is hope.

There is hope, but not much time: one Earth, one changing climate. Reversing that change promises to be a close shave.

Pete Haug's eclectic interests and several careers drew him across the U.S. and into China with his wife before retiring south of Colfax. peterlaoshi@gmail.com