NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

Founder of WorldWatch Institute a modern-day ecological prophet

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More than 150 years ago, Native American Chief Seattle in Puget Sound allegedly warned humans of the dire consequences awaiting them if they mistreated the land, the air, the water and one another:

"Man did not weave the web of life; he is merely a strand in it. Whatever he does to the web, he does to himself."

Lester Brown, president of the Earth Policy Institute* in Washington, D.C., since 2001, has the 21st-century statistics to prove it. Brown, a former tomato farmer from New Jersey, earned degrees in agricultural economics from the University of Maryland and in public administration from Harvard in 1964. In 1974, with support from the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, Brown founded the WorldWatch Institute, the first research institute devoted to the analysis of global environmental issues.

He has become a modern-day prophet of interconnectedness. While historians have puzzled over who might have actually penned the poetic words attributed to the Washington state chief, no such confusion exists around Brown's writings.

He is the author of 50 books and publisher of the annual *Worldwatch Papers*, the annual *State of the World* reports, and *World Watch Magazine*. Last month, his 51st book, *Full Planet, Empty Plates: The New Geopolitics of Food Scarcity* (W.W. Norton) rolled off the presses.

Brown brought complimentary copies with him to Columbus, Ohio, on Oct. 4, when he came to present a keynote address at the fourth annual international EcoSummit conference, attended by more than 1,500 delegates from 75 countries. The five-day meeting included 500 small workshops with ecologists and scientists reporting on their work in ecological engineering and restoration, green infrastructure, sustainable agriculture carbon sequestration and protection of biodiversity.

In his role as prophet, Lester Brown's address was packed with information about the global catastrophic scenarios already in progress and the curatives for stemming them.

Drought conditions caused by climate change and soil erosion from over-cultivation and overgrazing have resulted in new dust bowls in northern China and parts of Russia. Climate change continues to have negative effects on food production. For each rise in degree Celsius, there can be a 16 percent decline in agricultural production.

Collectively, these developments have sharply decreased the amount of available food for poor people in developing countries and have driven up the price of grain.

"Food has become the new oil and land the new gold," he said. "Families are knocking down to one meal per day or having several foodless days a week."

A recent survey by Save the Children found that 27 percent of families in Nigeria are going without food two days a week. In Peru it is 14 percent; in India, 24 percent.

Another problem contributing to the food shortage originates at the gas pump, Brown said. When Washington decided to reduce U.S. dependence on foreign oil, the government upped the use of grain to produce ethanol. Grain production for alcohol distillation went from 41 million tons in 2005 to 127 million tons today.

Bringing those figures directly to the gas pump means that the grain needed to produce 25 gallons of ethanol for an SUV "would be enough to feed one person for a whole year." Brown said if all the grain going into gas tanks were diverted to food production, 400 million people could have enough to eat.

"There is no social justification for the massive conversion of food into fuel for cars," he said.

Land grabs are another serious reason for the global food shortage, he said.

"It's become every country for itself," Brown said, citing a World Bank survey that says more than 160 million acres in Ethiopia, Sudan and South Sudan have been purchased through deals arranged with business firms and investments banks in Saudi Arabia, China and South Korea. These wealthy countries are growing food and importing it to their own people, the survey says. Local farmers in the poor countries have no say and are often evicted from their property, giving them no way to grow their own crops.

Other negative situations impacting the planet include excessive drilling of aquifers by Yemen, Iraq, Syria, Saudi Arabia, China, India and the United States. In India alone, 75 million people are being sustained by over-pumping.

Brown's address held even more facts to make the head spin. The population figures are overwhelming. Each year brings 80 million additional babies into the world.

"That's 219,000 more people every day showing up at the dinner table," he said.

While millions continue to starve, 3 billion people benefiting from their country's rising economies are moving up the food chain. China is the latest country of increasing meat consumers. People there are eating twice as much beef and pork as people in the United States.

But like every good prophet, Brown offers solutions, though they do not come without sacrifices. Everyone needs to consume less meat to free up more land used for grazing to grow crops, he said. Brown would tax meat consumption and cut fish and carp cultivation. He called for the eradication of poverty and increasing reproductive health care and family planning.

"Progress on one will help the other," he said, saying that stabilizing population depends on eliminating poverty. Population growth rates show that countries where population's size has stabilized are almost all high-income countries.

Other priorities are to raise water productivity by looking for fewer water-intensive crops.

He advises cutting carbon emissions "and doing it fast" by going to electric cars and converting to solar and wind energy. All that are lacking here are the political will and changing the current mindset, Brown said.

He cited President Franklin D. Roosevelt as one politician who was flexible and daring enough to shake up the status quo. In his World War II mobilization efforts, Roosevelt banned the production and sale of automobiles and turned the industry toward producing trucks and planes for the defense effort.

"We restructured our industrial economy in a matter of months, even when the people didn't see how it could be done," Brown said.

During a question-and-answer session, Brown was asked what he sees as the most pressing priorities to address. His answer: working on population issues and eradicating fossil fuels.

"If I had $100 to invest, I would put half into family planning and the rest into the Sierra Club's Beyond Coal [1] campaign," he said. Beyond Coal would close all coal mines and replace them with sustainable energy production.

The Catholic hierarchy will not like Lester Brown's ideas about population. But then, prophets do have a way of upsetting their listeners and offering predictions and solutions, which are often unwelcome. The Roman miter mindset seems intractable on this subject, all in the name of virtue. However, can this be one major instance of misplaced virtue that, in the long run, is shearing away at the web of creation?

** An earlier version of this story incorrectly stated where Brown is president.*

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Links:
[1] http://www.beyondcoal.org/