Helping layperson understand science of pollution and more

Willtonian heads Center for Environment and Population

By Jeff Yates

Twenty years ago sprawl wasn’t a common term applied to residential development and recycling hadn’t become a daily activity. While there’s been much progress since then, dramatic changes have occurred; houses have started popping up with increasing frequency where hay fields once stood and traffic congestion has become the norm. At the same time, a growing understanding of the environmental effects of population and its movement has blossomed, spawned in large part by the changes people were seeing around them.

Now there are entire academic disciplines dedicated solely to studying how human actions can harm, or help, the natural world. While there are means of scientific documents that allow us to understand the changes development and population have caused in the environment, most are not accessible, or even comprehensible, to all but those with Ph.D.s.

Vicky Markham, who moved to Wilton with her family last July, is a founder of the Center for Environment and Population. The Center for Environment and Population is a non-governmental organization headquartered in New Canaan that acts as a liaison and information source to compile the best and latest information on housing trends, population density and movement and the impact these things have on the environment.

“She is someone who is very dedicated to making sure that everyone can understand it,” said Ms. Markham.

Founded in 1999 by Ms. Markham, who worked for Planned Parenthood International, the Center for Environment and Population works for more than 20 years, earning her master’s degree in environmental sciences from Yale University and then working in the field. Over the years she has created documentary films on population and the environment for Turner Broadcasting, worked for Planned Parenthood International covering Africa and Asia, and worked in Switzerland for the World Wildlife Fund. The Center for Environment and Population began as a project of the Yale Center in San Francisco and an offshoot of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Recently the Center for Environment and Population and the World Wildlife Fund installed a tower in New Canaan discussing the ways that population impacts the environment. The event was in coordination with and endorsed by the United Nations Population Fund as part of World Environment Day, an environmental awareness campaign.

Ms. Markham has been doing environmental and population work for more than 20 years, earning her master’s degree in environmental sciences from Yale University and

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For years, people couldn’t see the effects their actions were having on the environment because Mother Nature is good at buffering toxins and pollutants, said Ms. Markham. Fertilizers, pesticides, sewage, and other pollutants created by people were readily absorbed by vegetation in upland areas and around water courses, filtering the harmful elements out of rain and snow. Eventually the human output began to show as the natural world became saturated and couldn’t absorb it any longer.

“Now people are waiting in traffic longer, or they’re seeing houses pop up all around them,” she said. “It’s getting to the point now where we’re breathing thresholds, the scientists tell us, that we can’t ignore it.”

Warnings about mercury in fish, acid rain, those are all visible signs, but humans are increasingly putting out more toxins than the environment can take in, but the trade-off is that with these increased levels of pollution people are beginning to realize the impact they have, and looking for ways to reduce the strain on the environment, she said.

“I really think people are starting to see things differently,” said Ms. Markham, pointing out the recent Wilton Garden Club’s plan to use native care pesticides and health. “Kids are starting to learn environmental science.”

While there’s much that may be done on the advocacy side of environmental politics, pressuring for clean air bills and pollution-reducing measures, Ms. Markham’s goal is simply to get the facts out to as many people, policy makers and advocacy groups as possible.

Her publications, including the U.S. State Reports on Population and the Environment, Issues on Population and the Environment, a report on the entire United States due out in September, and a planned report on the state of Connecticut, work toward that, pulling together the knowledge and case studies of the best experts in the various fields, from freshwater ecosystems to housing trends. The reports are then used by advocacy groups such as the World Wildlife Fund, the Nature Conservancy and others to create the guidelines of the trends caused by land use, habitat fragmentation and other impacts caused by a growing population.

“We present the scientific facts, they come in more on the advocacy side, the policy side,” said Ms. Markham. “We’re not partisan. We try our hardest to stay balanced.”

Because the center doesn’t create reports promoting or decrying population trends and their impacts, but just presents the numbers without the scientific jargon, the publications can be understood and used by any.

In fact, when Ms. Markham completed a report on the population of New Hampshire and its environmental effects, the front of reality actually used the data to determine where the best locations were for future development. It turns out the type of use Ms. Markham expected, or even encouraged, but it was a valid use of the information her group had compiled, she said.

Ms. Markham has hosted numerous lectures, roundtable discussions and presentations on the ways that population affects the environment. On Earth Day she was one of the featured speakers at a United Nations Association of the United States of America event in New York looking at the role of America in a global context.

The United States, the third most populated country in the world, is the only industrialized country expected to see increased population growth in the coming years and decades, said Ms. Markham.

Which means, by far has the largest environmental impact,” she said. “We have the largest footprints, the largest carbon footprint.”

While it is typically affluent areas, or those that are most remote, such as building material for larger homes, more fuel for vehicles, and fertilizers and pesticides for lawn maintenance, Ms. Markham said the affluent communities are often the ones most able to adopt environmentally friendly alternatives.

“When you have a more affluent population, you are able to try more environmentally sound options, such as organic food, said Ms. Markham. “You’re getting people who are able to buy hybrid cars. They’ll try those more expensive commodities in the market.”

Even in towns where the population is growing rapidly the amount of environmental impact may be dramatically smaller than in other, smaller towns with poor land use practices. In a town decides to ban new homes from being built in residential sprawl, which breaks apart larger tracts of land and degrades biological diversity, or adopts energy-efficient equipment in schools, municipal buildings, supermarkets, and homes, the impact on the land is greatly decreased, said Ms. Markham.

“A lot of people in one area can have a smaller impact based on the choices they make,” she said.

"Vicky Markham pictured above in Wilton is the founder of the Center for Environment and Population in New Canaan, which has produced numerous reports on the impacts that population has on the environment, and helped bring forward below, this podcast, "Logical Diversity." The Center for Environment and Population is a non-governmental organization based in New Canaan that acts as a liaison and information source to help people understand climate and population changes. They are experts in a range of environmental and population issues, including urban sprawl, biodiversity, climate change, and more. Ms. Markham and her organization use data and research to help people understand and address these complex issues. "