

The Undeniable Truth – A MAHB Dialogue with Actress, Athlete, Planetary Activist Alexandra Paul

Geoffrey Holland



Sharing our world | Photo courtesy of the author

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Geoffrey Holland: You’ve had an enduring career as an actress in Hollywood. What has motivated you to leverage your celebrity to speak out on the ‘undeniable truths’ about a range of worthy issues, including healthy eating habits, physical fitness, and protecting the environment?

Alexandra Paul: I was an activist long before I became an actress – I wrote to President Nixon when I was 9 to ask him to stop pollution. I received a letter back and was ecstatic. I felt heard, and it was empowering. I still believe in the power of one person to make a difference, and that response was the genesis of that. My mom also boycotted tuna in the 1970s because of the dolphin by catch, iceberg lettuce to support Cesar Chavez, and Nestle when it was accused of getting African mothers hooked on formula. Having been born in England during WWII, she didn't like waste, and we recycled and turned off the lights when we left the room and conserved water. That translated into an environmental ethic for me. I became a vegetarian when I was 14 for the environment, and then head of the Energy Committee at my boarding school. I also stumped for independent presidential candidate John Anderson, because he promoted solar panels. I asked my dad to take me to a peace protest in New York City when I was 15. So when I moved to Los Angeles at 18 and started working as an actress, it was only

natural for me to continue speaking out on issues about which I felt strongly about - the environment, peace, human overpopulation.

Later, I co-founded a non profit called Young Artists United, which encouraged young people working in show business to leverage their media talent and power to do good for young people around the country. It was the era of the “just say no” to drugs campaign and we scoffed at the ineffectiveness an old lady like Nancy Reagan telling kids to just stop doing drugs. Our strategy was to set up speaking tours where our members would speak about their own experiences with drugs, depression, eating disorders, sexuality, divorced parents and let the kids decide how they wanted to conduct themselves. The only thing we said No to was drunk driving . Everything else was presented in a way that was very honest and very personal. We also raised money for children’s organizations, joined voter campaigns, helped out at teen centers and produced PSAs. Another motivation early on in my career was Jane Fonda and her husband, CA State Senator Tom Hayden. I was a member of their group Network, which was mobilizing Hollywood talent to get involved in politics. There were also 2 environmental groups, Earth Communications Office (ECO, of which I was a founding board member) and Environmental Media Association (EMA) trying to get Hollywood to be more ecologically aware on sets and with story lines. I migrated away from both groups at the end of the 1980s because they didn't deal with the human overpopulation issue, which I saw as the most important environmental issue.

GH: Human overpopulation is an issue you have been outspoken on since you became a public figure. Why population?

AP: I took 3 months off from acting in 1993 to focus solely on speaking out on the issue. I spoke to 6,000 Los Angeles schoolchildren during that time, in small classrooms or assemblies. I have a TEDx talk on the benefits of the one child family and traveled to Sierra Leone with the excellent group Population Media Center to help with a radio program there. I also helped create 2 educational films about human overpopulation and overconsumption- those are the ones you wrote and produced, Geoff! Just recently, I spoke at George Washington University and a local LA college on the topic.

I feel strongly that I have to speak out because I believe this issue is at the core of our environmental problems! And people are so resistant to discussing the issue. But if we don't lower our birth rates we will not solve any ecological challenge, and we will be faced with wars over resources, unfettered migration and a widening split between the haves and have nots. Add climate change to the equation and we will see so much human suffering.

I have spoken to so many different groups and have only had one person say she was offended so it is patently obvious that we CAN discuss this issue without alienating people. And I don't pull punches: since I don't depend on donors and I feel such a sense of urgency, I don't pussyfoot around what I believe we need to do: lower the birthrate to an average of 1 child per couple and get the population down to 2 billion people.

GH: Most of the world's nations have already lowered human fertility to at or below replacement level. What are the factors that have facilitated this change and what can we do to see this success in other regions where fertility rates remain high?

AP: About half the world lives in countries with sub-replacement fertility, but their populations are still growing from migration, population momentum and increased life expectancy. Unfortunately, "sub-replacement" – anything under 2.33 kids per woman – is not nearly enough anymore – we need to get the average number of kids to 1 per woman. So there is no resting on our laurels. But I digress, let me get to solutions.

I believe that we need to encourage people to truly understand the benefits of having a one child family. Right now, most cultures only see the debits (lonely, overindulged children; who will care for aged parents). But there are so many personal positives (less stress and financial worries for parents, more attention and quality time from parents, better education, better relationship between the couple), as well as societal ones (less crowding in schools, less burden on municipalities). A lowering population brings economic challenges in a capitalist society (fewer consumers to buy things) but they pale in comparison to soil depletion, lowered water tables, deforestation, overcrowding, air pollution, growing greenhouse gas emissions etc. So getting people to change their outlook – that so much breeding will actually be our downfall, instead of the key to our survival – is imperative, and that can be accomplished by positive messaging through campaigns and media. In Brazil for example, one of the reasons for its low birth rate is the popularity of telenovelas, soap operas where the characters don't have many children. Population Media Center has been producing successful and influential radio dramas for years that contain story lines that encourage listeners to discuss important issues like gender equality, sex education, prenatal health care, birth spacing, women in the workplace – all issues that indirectly promote lowered birth rates.

Another very important aspect is to educate girls around the world. Each year of secondary education means fewer babies she will have, because she will be empowered to work, so will have a *raison d'être* outside of being a mother. She will have economic power in the household, which translates to respect, so she will be able to use birth control to space her kids even if her husband is reluctant (men usually want more kids than women do, due to the facts that they don't raise them and more kids equals masculinity in many cultures.) It is also important that woman have equity in the workplace and in all aspects of society. Something even the United States has not accomplished – an Institute for Women's Policy Research study found that woman make 49 cents for every dollar a man earns and the Equal Rights Amendment still has not been passed.

Of course, sex education, legal abortion and accessible birth control is vital. Government policies like social security are very important – this ensures that parents won't have to have a lot of children to take care of them in old age. Another interesting policy that has lowered birth rates in some areas is the law that a father has to be listed on the birth certificate - being thus held accountable for child support has made a lot of men more careful about impregnating women. In South America laws like this have helped encourage fathers to send their daughters

to school when they initially would have preferred they stay home and work around the house. Schools have encouraged the success of this cultural shift by sending girls home after school with free food for the family. So there are a lot of policies that governments can implement to incentivize activities that promote lower birth rates.

GH: Fitness has always been a big part of your life. You are one of the few celebrities that has successfully competed in an Ironman Triathlon. How has your athletic discipline helped to shape other aspects of your life?

AP: I work out because it gives me that endorphin high that keeps me from being depressed. It also maintains my weight, important to a lot of American women, especially actresses! I am not a particularly talented athlete, but I am good at consistency and persistence. I am not actually naturally talented at much – and I don't say that to be modest. I actually think it has been a plus for me as I tend to prepare well, work hard and plod along until I get something done. So my gifts lie there. I think my discipline has given me such a leg up over people way smarter, more charismatic than I.

GH: You are a staunch advocate for animal rights. In your opinion, why should animals have rights, and what kind of rights should they have?

AP: I believe all creatures have the right to exist independent of what they can do for humans. I especially believe that we don't have the right to make them suffer or capture them in any way for our entertainment, scientific/medical advancements, work nor food. I don't even ride horses anymore, as I don't believe it is right to put a piece of metal in a horse's mouth, 150 lbs on her back and force her to go anywhere she hasn't given consent to go. I have been on many dairy farms and I am shocked at our acceptance of how farm animals live – baby calves taken from their mothers within hours of birth and isolated in hutches for months where they can take at most 4 steps at a time. I am concerned about how a lot of pets are treated in this country – dogs, for example, are taken from their family very early to live with an entirely different species, often trapped in apartments alone for 10 hours a day and when they are allowed out, it is on the end of a leash for 15 minutes and then back inside again. It is weird. And inhumane.

We look at animals very much from our point of view, and not from their perspective. Man's belief that this planet and everything on it is for our usage is going to be our downfall, but from a moral point of view it is just wrong to do what we do to animals. If aliens came down and subjugated humans like we subjugate all other creatures, we would be horrified.

GH: Twenty years ago, you were a pioneer as one of the first people to drive an electric car every day – a General Motors EV1. It seems we're on the cusp of a massive shift in the auto industry to electric cars. How do you feel about that personally, and why is the transition away from gasoline powered vehicles important?

AP: After the Exxon Valdez spilled in 1989, I was up on my high horse about the oil companies – until I realized that I and my car were one of the reasons the oil companies were thriving. So I bought an old Datsun that was converted to electric the following year, making it almost 30 years that I have been driving EVs. Getting off oil is vital if we are to combat climate change. Battery electrics powered by rooftop solar is the answer – although it scares the energy companies because it removes consumers from the teats of big business in 2 ways. Hydrogen is not the answer, as it adds an unnecessary (and energy consuming) step to the process and keeps drivers in the thrall of the power companies because they have to purchase the hydrogen from a company instead of getting their energy from the sun.

GH: Your [podcast](#) encourages healthy lifestyle changes, including a commitment to a plant-based diet. Can a plant-based diet really be good for people and the planet?

AP: Eating a whole food vegan diet has been proven to improve your health by lowering diabetes, heart disease, cholesterol levels and extending life expectancy. It also means having an environment less polluted by manure runoff – dealing with manure from pigs, chickens and cows is a huge challenge as it is so unnatural to have so many animals bred and confined. Eating vegan also changes your heart, because your diet has caused less violence and suffering. I changed after I began vegan – I became more patient, more empathetic and more aware of suffering and inequality. For the planet, eschewing meat and dairy means less land cleared for cattle grazing, less methane emitted into the air from millions of cow farts, more efficient use of crops (food goes directly to humans instead of being eaten by farm animals for their meat and milk). And of course being vegan is a win for farm animals, fur animals and lab animals.

GH: What environmental and economic benefits would come from a cultural scale transition to plant based eating?

AP: We still need to lower our population to 2 billion for a world where every human has a decent quality of life, and eating lower on the food chain means less environmental degradation and more food for people who are on the planet. With climate change coming on us so quickly, we will be more apt to survive the problems it brings if we have fewer humans and we all use fewer resources. Eating plants lowers the use of water and land drastically. Studies show that there are more social problems when there is overcrowding and environmental degradation.

Even if we all go vegan tomorrow and have amazing advances in technology, our economic system needs to change if we are to survive. Capitalism depends on eternal growth and that just won't work on a planet with finite resources. It amazes me that even the smartest people still think we can somehow have unlimited growth of human population, water use, land ... I think they forget about quality of life and are so focused on economics. Being obsessed with having a lot of paper money but not worrying about topsoil shows the limits to the human brain.

GH: Teenage activist Greta Thunberg has galvanized young people around the world to stand together to demand firm action against climate change. How important is it to have young people in leadership roles, who will shape a future that is life-affirming and sustainable?

AP: When you are young, everything is possible. You are not as constrained by having to live by society's rules to survive and you are not as overwhelmed by day to day responsibilities so you can dream big. Young people are beautiful galvanizers for adults who find themselves stuck in the status quo. Plus it is the young people who are going to inherit what we have wrought, so they have a lot of standing to protest how we are treating the planet.

GH: What are the other existential threats to the biosphere that you are concerned about, and how do we get people thinking and talking about these concerns?

AP: Oh my gosh, I am aware of so much just a trip to the grocery store can take ages as I weigh the issues of what a container is made of, how far something has traveled, is it vegan, is it local or made by a conglomerate, was it tested on animals... I am right now just buying used clothes because I haven't figured out what is made without human exploitation... so really at the moment my mantra is "Be kind, be kind, be kind". I believe if we focus on kindness to all living creatures and the planet, we would alleviate so many problems. It is a long, winding journey to try to be a better, more loving person with a lighter footprint on the planet.

Alexandra Paul is an [actress](#) who has appeared in over 100 films and television shows. She is most known for her 5 year stint on the tv show Baywatch. She won the International Green Cross award for environmental leadership in Hollywood, and the United Nations has honored her for her work on human overpopulation. Alexandra was the ACLU of Southern California's 2005 Activist of the Year for her history of environmentalism, voter registration and peace advocacy. Last Chance For Animals named her 2014 Vegan of the Year. She currently hosts the [Switch4Good podcast](#), about the benefits of a plant based lifestyle. As a [certified health coach](#), Alexandra helps people get healthier and happier. Alexandra Paul continues to act and has two movies coming out in 2019.

The MAHB Dialogues are a monthly Q&A blog series focused on the need to embrace our common planetary citizenship. Each of these Q&As will feature a distinguished author, scientist, or leader offering perspective on how to take care of the only planetary home we have.

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