

Pandas or babies?

Robertson discusses population

BY JULIE POUCHER

Professor Paul Robertson of the biology department urged students Tuesday night to get a perspective on environmental problems in his lecture, "Pandas Or Babies." He asked people to pretend for a moment that they were not human beings but martians looking down on planet Earth.

Robertson began his program by talking about the theory of gaia, a theory advanced by biologist James Lovelock in recent years, that Earth is a superecosystem composed of organisms and inorganic materials that interact to maintain resilience and natural subsidies. He said the system should provide enough energy to grow and repair itself.

"We have lost a gut knowledge, a genuine sense of how important the total number of species, both plant and animal, are to us," said Robertson. He said, "The health and maintenance of the system is dependent upon biodiversity.... Organisms don't exist as discrete units but as parts of bigger systems we call ecosystems."

The current human population of five billion is expected by statisticians to reach eight billion by the year 2015. Robertson said he is concerned about the possible impact this could have on the global ecosystem. He said every time the human population increases it

leaves less room for other species.

"We are the first species to have a global effect," Robertson said. He explained that 17 non-human species are going extinct each hour, especially in the tropical rainforests, where 90 percent of all species on Earth live.

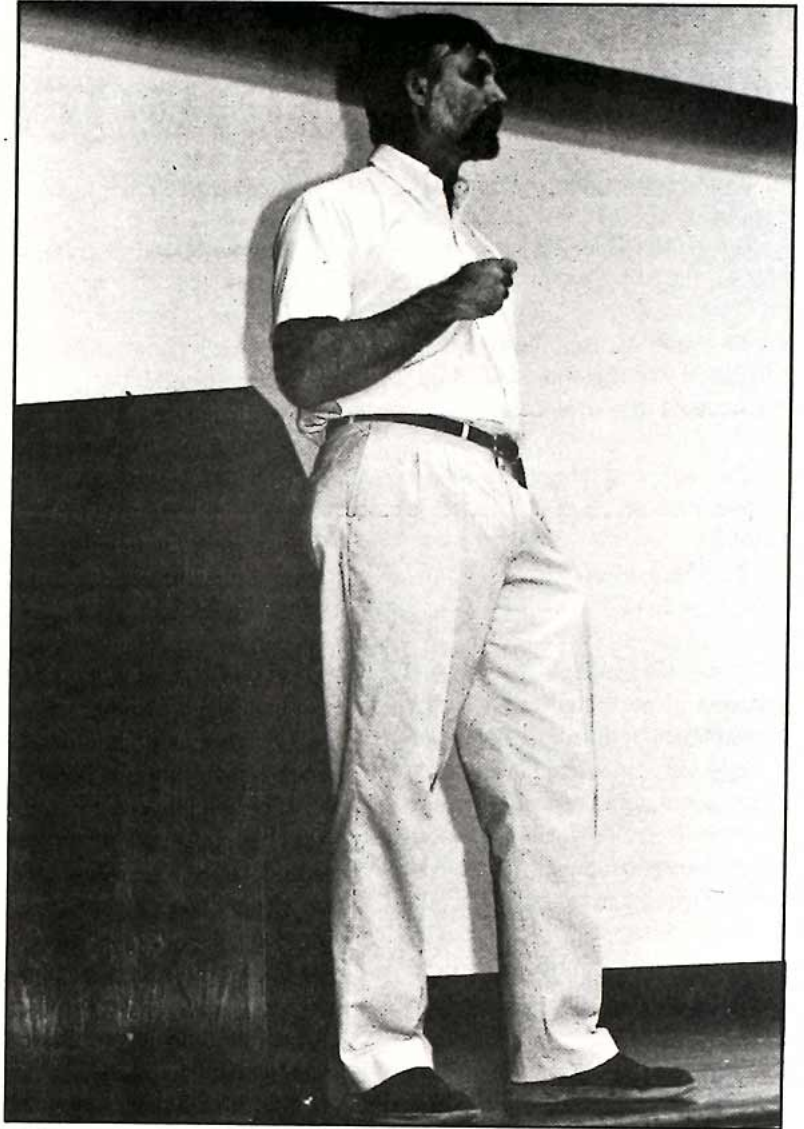
Robertson said people would read about the last panda dying, including those in zoos, in the next twenty years. He said although their extinction is not a direct threat to us, they are a symptom of the overall problem. "More will be going with [them]," he said.

He said, in the last 50 years, human populations have increased substantially in the tropics in contrast to the diminishing populations in the Soviet Union and parts of Western Europe. The tropical rainforests in the world, according to Robertson, comprise a total area that is 20 times the size of England.

"One England-size area is being destroyed every year, so at this rate we'll only have rainforests for another 20 years," he said.

Robertson does have hope. In terms of solutions to environmental problems, he said although recycling is important in the short term, it isn't a long term solution.

"We have to change the way we interact with nature emotionally...put [ourselves] back into the process of nature; respect the system itself," said Robertson. □



Paul Robertson discusses the environment.

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