

# John Tanton: Control Immigration or We'll All Yearn to Breathe, Period

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## Style

### On Immigration, A Theorist Who's No Fence-Sitter

By ANITA HUSLIN  
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PETOSKEY, Mich. — Let's just get this out of the way. John Tanton, mastermind of the modern-day movement to curb immigration, is a tree-hugger. Literally. He has a favorite pair of ash trees "this big around," he says, spreading his arms wide. He likes to visit them every so often in the forest just north of here, see how they're doing.



John Tanton worries there are too many of us.

He worries about them, too, whether — or when — the invaders, the metallic green emerald ash borers, will overwhelm them, wipe one of the dominant native tree species off the North American continent. To think that this little bug could do such a thing, he says, "it's just hard to take."

It's snowing as he sits in his office on the main street of Petoskey (population 6,080, 94 percent white, 3 percent Native American, less than 1 percent Asian or black, according to the 2000 Census). The white blanketing the town lends it a Norman Rockwell feel, with Little Traverse Bay serving as a backdrop to the quaint storefronts and Victorian clapboard

See TANTON, D5, Col. 1

TANTON, *From D1*

architecture. Rampaging hordes seem far, far away.

Yet as he considers the future, Tanton's brow wrinkles and beneath his desk he clasps his hands, which sometimes shake from the effects of Parkinson's disease. He is 72, a retired country doctor, and it's been nearly 30 years since he first went to Washington to raise the alarm about unfettered population growth. Since then, he has formed, led or contributed to more than a dozen groups that promote strict immigration limits. And for this, he's earned the label "The Puppeteer" from the Southern Poverty Law Center. "John Tanton," the center declared in its journal, *Intelligence Report*, "can claim without exaggeration that he is the founding father of America's modern anti-immigration movement."

His tireless efforts have created the impression of a powerful grassroots movement against immigration, his opponents say, but it all points back to one man. At the same time his early roots in such environmental groups as the Sierra Club and the National Audubon Society have lent him a mainstream credibility.

Three decades after he began agitating about it, immigration has become a hot-button issue — the House passed a \$6 billion bill to build a fence along the Mexican border, and several local governments have passed measures to crack down on illegal immigrants already here. But the courts have struck down several of these.

Tanton worries — how will the United States survive the "invasion" of people from Central and Latin America, not to mention China and Korea? More than ever, he is convinced that as they continue to come — waves of legal and illegal "interlopers" — the environment, the culture and the economy of the country will irreparably erode.

"We have 19 cities now on the globe with more than 10 million people in them," he says. "Only one of them [Tokyo] is in the First World. So all the rest of them have got poor water supplies, poor sewage, poor public services."

The effects, to him, are easy to imagine.

"So what happens is the next round of SARS doesn't get contained," he says. Beyond that, it's not too much of a stretch for him to envision war and famine over dwindling resources.

Hyperbole? To his mind, the un-

checked exaggeration is coming from his opponents, who have branded him a xenophobe and a racist.

"So many conversations on immigration don't go anywhere," he says, "it's just people venting feelings. . . . Okay, I agree your grandmother is a great person. Does that mean you're for open borders? That's not a prescription for social peace."

#### 'A Great Clash'

It's difficult to square the label of xenophobic misanthrope with the image of the retired ophthalmologist who weeps at the memory of removing a bandage from the eyes of a patient, and having him see again.

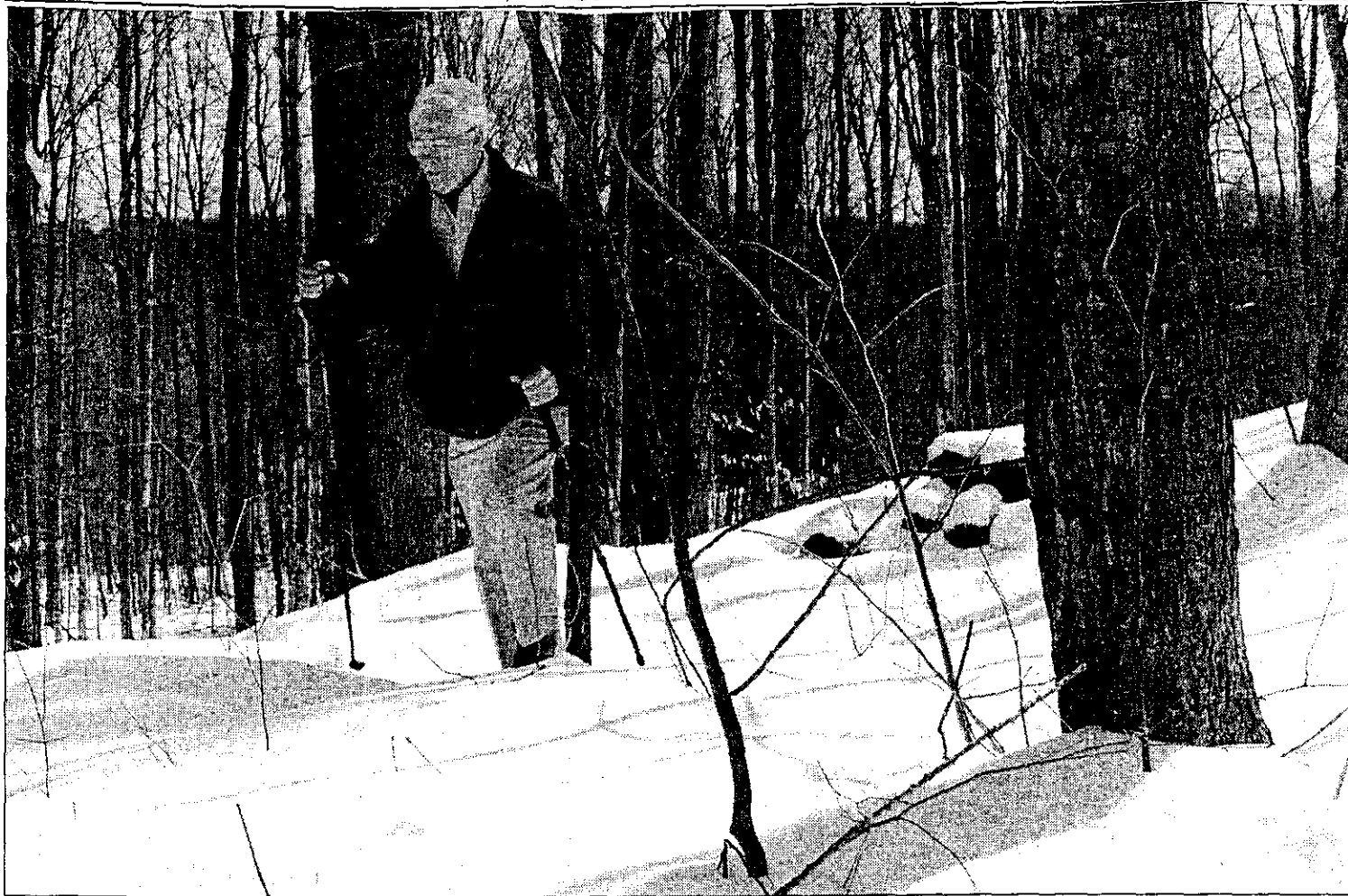
Tanton chose his profession and the town of Petoskey because they afforded him the time to raise a family, maintain a vegetable garden, raise honeybees and work on issues he cared about. Population control became the overriding theme early on.

In 1964, while he was interning in a Denver hospital, his young wife, Mary Lou, provided family planning information to low-income women who had wanted two children but were leaving the maternity ward with their fifth or sixth. In this, Tanton saw a looming apocalypse, living evidence of the theory postulated in Paul Ehrlich's 1968 book, "The Population Bomb" — left unchecked, the world's population would double every 35 years, occupying the remaining habitable open space and overrunning cities and towns.

This did not come to pass. But, Tanton says, the threat is still out there. "I'm anti-immigrant like a person on a diet is anti-food," he insists. But the intake must be controlled. "You don't wait till you're at 390 million [people] and think you can deal with the problem." His ideas became even more focused after he read the French novel "The Camp of the Saints," a darkly prophetic allegory of a million destitute people fleeing Kolkata and landing in Europe, where they loot, rape and pillage.

"Camp," which Tanton had translated and reprinted in English by Social Contract Press, his small publishing house, has been criticized as a racist parable with one message: Keep the savages out. Once, Tanton says, he was surprised by this kind of reaction. Now he simply dismisses it as an emotional response to a tangible problem.

He calls this the "Statue of Liberty phase" of the immigration debate, when proponents cite the Emma



BY LANCE WYNN — GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

**John Tanton hikes on the North Country Trail, near Petoskey, Mich. Tanton believes that unchecked immigration will drain the country's resources.**

Lazarus poem inscribed in bronze on the base of the statue: "Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free." This, to his mind, misses the point:

"You have on the one hand an economic system that as best as I can see is based on perpetual growth," and a finite space — the United States — to accommodate it. "Sooner or later there's going to be a great clash between those two and the question is who's going to come out on top," he says. "My perspective is that Mother Nature bats last." He envisions rivers running dry, crop shortages, polluted water and air.

Frank Sharry is executive director of the National Immigration Forum, an advocacy group that has frequently butted heads with the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), which Tanton created. Sharry says that Tanton and his ilk might think they're going to save the republic. But "I can't help but fear that at the root of their views is a disturbing combination of the idea there are some people who are good, some who are bad and overall there are way too many people to begin with. And that's an ideological strain that seems to me a bit off the chart."

That's how the Sierra Club read it as well in the '70s when Tanton, a

member of its population committee, tried to get the board to adopt immigration as a cause. When this was voted down, he and his allies encouraged other like-minded candidates to run for the board.

Carl Pope, who was executive director at the time, considered it a hostile takeover attempt that reverberated for years. "The whole idea of people trying to hijack an organization to advance their cause was outrageous," says Pope. "And I found many of the things he had said since I had known him deplorable and unconscionable." (Tanton later wrote that "the Sierra Club may not want to touch the immigration issue, but the immigration issue is going to touch the Sierra Club!") Rebuffed, Tanton created first FAIR and then U.S. English, a group to promote English as the official language of the United States.

"Immanuel Kant once said language and religion are the ultimate dividers of society," Tanton explains. "With my physician's background, I thought prevention would let us get ahead of this problem."

He was persuasive enough to attract some prominent voices to U.S. English, but a 1986 memo backfired big-time. Asserting that immigrants' higher birth rates would lead to a na-

tion dominated by their descendants, he wrote: "Perhaps this is the first instance in which those with their pants up are going to get caught by those with their pants down!" Walter Cronkite and the group's executive director, Linda Chavez, quit in protest. Eventually Tanton stepped down.

But he went on to found nearly a dozen other groups.

Tanton has tempered his rhetoric in recent years. But Clarissa Martinez, policy director for the National Council of La Raza, a Latino advocacy organization, finds it a source of endless frustration that his organizations, which she regards as hate groups, have been treated as credible actors in Washington policy debates, testifying at congressional hearings, offering research and even winning a contract with the Census Bureau.

"On the surface there's legitimate policy they are debating, but they're having the debate in code. . . . It's not just how many people are coming, it's *who* are coming," Martinez says.

### Seasonal Migration

On a recent morning Tanton drives along Little Traverse Bay,

heading through town. In the winter, it's mostly empty. In the summer, the roads fill up with people coming to their vacation homes. The restaurants, hotel staffs and cleaning services fill with migrant workers — many from as far as Jamaica. Otherwise, of the town's few immigrants, most are educated professionals — doctors, teachers, scientists.

He passes the spot where he and Mary Lou camped when he first came to town to interview for a job at the hospital. Down the street, they once marched beside a Planned Parenthood float that declared: *Whatever your cause, it's lost without population control.* He drives past the 20 acres of wetlands and meadows he and his wife donated earlier this year for open space. He takes satisfaction in what he doesn't see: a waterfront community of 400 homes that he sued to stop 40 years ago, because the developer wanted to dam a creek to create a lake.

But he also knows that the numbers are against him. Here in Petoskey, the results of his work are evident. It's a small place, where one man can make a difference. But beyond the bay is Lake Michigan, and beyond that the great expanse of the continental United States, and he knows it's filling up with people.