

## **The antinatalist who wants you well**

A longtime environmentalist obsessed with overpopulation, Les U. Knight dreams of annihilating [eliminating] the human species (but with its consent). A project he has been championing for fifty years through the Voluntary Extinction Movement. At a time when fertility in developed countries is falling and the climate crisis is reaching new records, can his message be taken seriously?

"THE BEST THING THAT CAN HAPPEN TO THE PLANET is for us to program our extinction," Les U. Knight calmly states. Squeezed into the close-up of his webcam, the founder of the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT) smiles. The septuagenarian, originally from Oregon, is amused by the time and date of our interview: November 11 at 11 a.m. A nice symbol for this fervent pacifist, far from the fanatical reputation that clings to him. At 77, this armchair activist—he's long since stopped demonstrating—punctuates every sentence with a witty quip, asserting his status as a bon vivant (vegetarian option) and philosophizing on the corrupted nature of human beings. While his thinking is radical, the man himself is surprisingly gentle. Yet this is not the term that spontaneously springs to mind when one considers the annihilation of the human race. Anyone who has seen Avengers: Endgame knows how this kind of ambition ends: badly.

### **"Peaceful Annihilation"**

Except that Les U. Knight has little in common with the big bad Thanos. Aside from his lack of a prognathous jaw and his very conventional sandy beige pigmentation, the American anti-natalist activist has absolutely no intention of exterminating us. Well, yes, but eventually and with our complicity. "I don't want you to die at all, even if, in fact, you will die one day. I just want you to leave no offspring (or as few as possible) behind." A misconception he's used to (in his early days, it earned him the attention of the French government for "cult-like behavior"). Yet, Les U. Knight's entire philosophy is based on the term "voluntary," attached to the name of his movement to dispel any misunderstanding. For the sake of clarity, then: VHEMT (pronounced "vehement") denounces mass murder, promotes birth control, and does not encourage suicide. "We advocate the peaceful annihilation of humanity," the activist summarizes. Nothing more, nothing less. The gradual extinction of the human species through a voluntary womb strike.

On its 1990s-style website (you can hear the modem buzzing when you click on the Majorelle blue links), the movement considers itself a "humanist alternative to human disasters." While the world's population has doubled over the past fifty years, the vertebrate population has fallen by 73%. This devastating erosion isn't limited to wild animals: over the same period, 35% of wetlands have disappeared, and 1 million animal and plant species are now threatened with extinction. "If we disappear tomorrow, ecosystems will have a chance to rebuild," argues Les U. Knight. A voluntary extinction, the last caused by man. A scenario difficult to imagine, even for a science fiction author. No alien invasion, rogue artificial intelligence, or bloodthirsty dictator. Just us, our survival instincts to switch off, and a planet to save.

### **Vasectomy without regret**

Like many activists of his generation, it was at the end of the 1960s that he fell into the environmentalist trap. At the time, the academic world was beginning to alert public opinion about the state of the planet. On April 22 1970, 22 million Americans participated in the first "Earth Day." In packed lecture halls, thousands of young people debated, put up posters, and distributed leaflets. Still a student, freshly returned from his military service—he escaped "by chance" the Vietnam War and served a few months in Germany before returning to Indiana—he discovered The P-Bomb, the bestseller by biologist and demographer Paul Ehrlich. Published in 1968, the essay links the ecological crisis and overpopulation and gave rise the following year to the Zero Population Growth association (later Population Connection), which encourages Americans to slow their population growth.

Les U. Knight was among its first members, but the student quickly became radicalized. "Their 'Stop at two' line wasn't effective enough in the short term, I quickly understood that we had to 'stop at once'. Gradually, he moved closer to deep ecology, conceptualized by the Norwegian Arne Næss, which prioritizes the interests of all living things over those of humanity. Marked by the consequences of the baby boom from childhood (in elementary school, his local church had to be converted into a school to accommodate everyone; in middle school, he attended classes at the departmental library, and in high school, in the cafeteria converted into a classroom), Les U. Knight decided to fully commit himself to the fight against overpopulation. Fully and intimately. At age 25, he underwent a vasectomy. "I would have done it sooner, but I couldn't afford it," he said fifty-two years later. He ultimately paid half price after agreeing to be a doctor's first patient at the local university's medical school. A decision he has never regretted.

Yet, this substitute teacher has seen thousands of children grow up in forty years of teaching. He has taught them history, science, and literature ("Everything, except sports!"). A career choice that has given him time to promote his movement. "But I've never proselytized at school; I've always kept these two aspects of my life completely separate," he immediately explains, still teaching 14-to-18-year-olds out of passion. One might have imagined him as a misanthrope, castigating younger generations addicted to hyperconsumption, at odds with a necessarily rigorous and ultra-religious family. Not so. Les U. Knight grew up in a small Oregon town where he spent his youth running around with his four brothers and sisters in the juniper bushes and doing "pretty much whatever he wanted." Having become an uncle and then a great-uncle, he seems tired of explaining that he doesn't hate children, quite the opposite. "Besides, I never use the term 'child' when I talk about my commitment, because children quickly become adults." If Les U. Knight doesn't want offspring, it's as much to protect the Earth as to spare unborn generations. On its website, the movement lists some thirty alternatives to the arguments put forward in defense of procreation. Among the most powerful: "Give a home to children who have already been born," "Spread your ideas, not your genes," or "Jobs to take care of children exist!" Good point, Professor...

### **Fantasized Submersion**

It was the rigorous pastor Thomas Malthus who first established a link at the end of the 18th century between available resources and the number of births. In his *Essay on the Principle of Population* (1798), the issue was obviously not a climate crisis, but rather the famine epidemics that were ravaging the poorest segments of the population. "The very idea of overpopulation appeared in the 1960s," explains Gilles Pison, professor at the Museum of Natural History and advisor to the National Institute of Demographic Studies. When Paul Ehrlich published his bestseller in 1968, the world's population was growing at the unprecedented rate of 2% per year. And while it has continued to decelerate since then (it was 0.9% in 2024 and could fall to 0% by the end of the century, according to UN forecasts.), the fantasy of submersion remains etched in our collective imagination. "It's a question that comes up in waves," notes Rebecca Laycock Pedersen, a doctor of sustainable development science. "It came back to the forefront when we surpassed 8 billion human beings on Earth," adds Éric Hello, a doctor and researcher in epistemology and history of science. The media coverage of the IPCC reports has made it a central issue. "The idea of a threshold is becoming a field of research in philosophy." Conferences are being organized, and the question of boundaries is very trendy at the moment," confirms the member of the Sciences, Philosophy, Humanities laboratory at the University of Bordeaux.

While it's stirring up the world of research, it's also intruding into our private lives. "For the past fifteen years, fertility has been declining in many advanced countries. Is this linked to anxiety about the future, global warming, or geopolitical conflicts? Scientists are beginning to address these issues," adds demographer Gilles Pison. Among childless couples surveyed in the United States in 2020 by Morning Consult, 1 in 4 cited the climate crisis as a determining factor in their choice. In Europe, the same story is true: a transnational survey conducted by YouGov in 2023 reveals that, to combat climate change, 30% of 25–34 year-olds are willing to have fewer children than they would have liked. Was VHEMT right too soon?

## **"Reproductive Fascism"**

"I suppose there are a few million people who have come to the same conclusion as us, but who have probably never heard of us," concedes Les U. Knight, who refuses to be considered the movement's founder. "I just gave a name to a philosophy that has existed since Homo sapiens." And a pretty good slogan, too: "May we live long and die out." Quietly shared in the 1980s, gained media attention with the creation of a newsletter in 1991, a fanzine, *These EXIT Times*, and its website 1996 (translated into thirty languages). It's difficult to say today how many activists claim to be part of it: the movement has no membership or operating fees, barely an updated mailing list. "Being VHEMT is a way of thinking," its spokesperson explains "To belong, you simply choose not to reproduce." There are a few early followers, but most of the "members" have never met, even through screens. "We are so different politically, religiously, and philosophically that I'm not sure we would get along. That's one of the reasons why we're not an organization."

Abroad, the movement is spreading. It has attracted followers in Brazil and Mexico, and a French-language Facebook group was created in 2012. Every time something happens there, laughs Les, he receives a notification: "I don't understand everything, but I see they're talking." Its approximately 1200 members, however, rarely post more than twenty messages per month. Yet France is a bastion of antinatalism, the homeland of figures of neo-Malthusianism from the late 19th century: Madeleine Pelletier, Paul Robin "and especially Marie Huot," insists Les U. Knight. While he can't pronounce her name, the activist admires the woman: her anti-colonialism, her fierce anarchism, her frenzied feminism, and her fight for sex education. "Patriarchy was born out of pronatalist ideology (A belief that a country's power depends on the number of its births, editor's note). "When we started building empires, we began controlling women's reproductive rights. We asked

them to have more children to feed the army and the factories. We need a lot of people at the bottom of the pyramid so that Elon Musk and his clique can stay at the top," enthuses Les U. Knight.

***"As soon as we got the fire under control, we started barbecuing everything we could find. We're dangerous, no matter how many of us there are."***

One hundred and fifty years ago, Marie Huot was already opposed to "Cannon Fodder, Factory Fodder." Like the activists of the 19th century, the septuagenarian wants to give women back their choice: "Cultural conditioning is so strong that some have never asked themselves if they want children," he laments, devastated by Donald Trump's re-election. He confides that he worries about the future of reproductive rights (both contraceptive and procreative). Against "reproductive fascism," Les U. Knight defends the power of feminism. A moral commitment, certainly, but also self-interested: access to family planning, education, and the freedom to procreate in good conditions tends to reduce fertility rates. In his book, [Drawdown. How to Reverse the Course of Global Warming](#) (2017), environmentalist Paul Hawken takes this utilitarian approach even further. By investing 7 euros in family planning, he explains, we could avoid the emission of a ton of CO2. This financing is much more profitable than wind power (24 euros) or solar power (51 euros), he adds.

### **"Universal Reproductive Rights"**

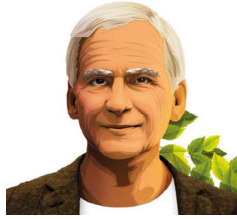
While Les U. Knight proudly claims Huot's legacy, he nevertheless rejects outright the (incentive) eugenics that characterized the neo-Malthusians of the last century (their fight aimed above all to reduce the fertility rate of the working classes). "Of course, rich people have a much larger environmental footprint than others, and of course, indigenous tribes are already decimated, but reproductive rights must be universal." he insists. A moral imperative that nevertheless weakens his fight. If tomorrow half the world's population were to disappear in the snap of a finger (back to Thanos), the emissions of CO2 would not automatically be halved. "The problem is not so much the number, but the lifestyle. The bulk of global warming is caused by a minority of human beings who live in the Global North. So, even if only one billion people remained but they all consumed like Westerners, we would not solve the problem," emphasizes demographer Gilles Pison.

Ultimately, the question of numbers matters little to Les. "As soon as we got the fire under control, we started barbecuing everything we could find. We're dangerous, no matter how many of us there are," he laments. While he secretly hopes the future will prove him wrong, he has no illusions. "It's a worldview rooted in pain. We realize that as a species, we've done terrible things to the planet and to future generations, so we rush to the easy way out," laments Rebecca Laycock Pedersen. "But what role do we give to structural responses in all of this?" asks the sustainable development specialist. If tomorrow France maintained its commitments to limit global warming to 1.5°C and implemented a one-child policy, birth control would reduce cumulative annual emissions by 5.5% in 2070. For comparison, according to the Shift Project, they would decrease by 8% each year if we simply renovated all existing housing...

### **Fundamentally at peace**

"I never thought I'd be able to convince 8 billion people to stop procreating," the activist admits. And that's perhaps the secret to the longevity of his commitment. "But every time one of us decides not to procreate, a new ray of hope pierces the darkness," we read on his website. A renunciation presented as the pinnacle of environmental commitment. To the point of exempting his followers from certain ecological gestures? Although he hasn't eaten meat for years, he uses his car for his daily commute and doesn't hesitate to fly to give an interview in Los Angeles. "If, thanks to this interview, just one person decides not to procreate, it will have been worth it," smiles the founder of VHEMT. Before conceding: "Okay, fine, it's a bit of haggling..." To compensate, he spends his weekends picking up the trash littering his neighborhood. A "hobby" he enjoys when he's not reading the pile of books on the climate crisis and overpopulation piling up on his desk.

There's something fundamentally peaceful about Les U. Knight. Yet the man regularly receives death threats for his stance ("They're rarely serious," he tries to reassure us). Charming, he has that nimble mischievousness that defuses all conflicts, in a word. "Without humor, living conditions on Earth would cause unbearable depression," summarizes his movement's manifesto. A precept he takes literally: in the summer, Les—known in Portland for awarding a vasectomy on Valentine's Day—organizes naturist croquet tournaments. A certain idea of life...



## **The confidences of Les U.Knight**

***"I would have liked to slip  
a drop of poison  
into Genghis Khan's drink."***

### **The invention that humanity should never have conceived?**

Fire. Even if, technically, it's not a human invention, most of those that harm humans and the biosphere were made possible by the mastery of fire.

### **What animal species would you like to be able to talk to?**

Blue whales. They seem so wise... I'd ask them what their songs are about.

### **How would you define the term "humanity"?**

At the risk of mansplaining—I'm sure the term has a French translation, humans use it all over the world!—a hairless species of the genus Homo, which has self-defined itself as sapiens sapiens. Considers itself the pinnacle of creation, but is often overcome by microbes. Calls itself a superpredator but consumes its prey to the point of causing their extinction, thus ensuring the conditions for its own demise.

### **The thing you can't give up to protect the environment?**

Living.

### **The event in history you would like to change?**

47,000 years ago, on the island of Sumatra, the Toba volcano erupted and almost wiped out Homo sapiens. Some 1,000 individuals survived. I would lower the number of survivors to zero. We would never know, and the extinction of millions of other species would be avoided.

**The person you would like to have dinner with?**

Genghis Khan, but young. I would slip a drop of poison into his drink, which would prevent the massacre of thousands of human beings and the forced impregnation of thousands of women.

**The best thing you can inherit?**

A healthy DNA.

**A guilty pleasure?**

Watching dashcam footage of car accidents.

**If you had the power to see the future, would you use it?**

Absolutely. I would have the ability to prevent wars. The amount of suffering I could avoid would be incredible... And I could also short the stock market.