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# The Pitter Patter of Carbon Footprints

Monday 26 April 2010 [SIGN UP TO NEWSLETTER](#)



It is time to start discussing whether we should do something about rising population. Six eminent speakers will begin the process at a prestigious public debate in London on 10 June.

World population increases by 235,000 every day. That's not the number of births, it's the increase. Enough people to fill the Soccer City World Cup Stadium in just 9 hours.



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Surveys show 70 to 80% of us think population growth is something we should be concerned about. People understand that the more of us there are, the more we consume. And yet, whilst almost every organisation in the world has a string of policies about how to reduce our consumption as individuals, it's difficult to find anyone who will even talk about the number of people.

Why is this? Well, although most people agree we should be concerned about population growth, what they disagree about, and violently, is just how concerned we should be.

One of the main reasons put forward for not being concerned is that whilst population is rising now, it's projected to level off by 2050. Some people even express concern about the long-term risk of population decline and the resulting consequences for our economies and for our cities. Growth is good. You only have to look at what's happening in Japan or at some of the ghost towns of Germany to see what happens when you stop growing.

Another line of thinking is that population isn't going up in the developed nations, it's going up in the developing nations, and because it's the developed nations that consume the most, we should be focussing on their consumption not population. Reducing consumption of those who use more will have a much greater benefit to the environment than tackling growth in countries whose consumption is low.

And then there is the Malthusian problem. In 1798 Thomas Robert Malthus said "The power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man", suggesting that population growth would inevitably lead to population collapse. But the problem with Malthus is that it's been 200 years since he predicted disaster, and it just hasn't happened.

## So should we just relax about population and keep focussing on consumption?

Well the trouble with relying on things like long-term projections is that 2050 is an awfully long way away, and long-term predictions are notoriously unreliable. Something unexpected always happens. How many predictions from 1970 have turned out to be right? The only real information we have says that right now, out of 230 countries in the world, only about 30 have declining populations. Even in the much-cited Japan and Germany, population decline is just 0.1% a year compared to the global population growth of 1.2%. So will global population level off in 40 years' time? It's not something we should count on.

So what about the argument that whilst the developing nations might be expanding, population growth in the developed nations has already levelled out? There is some truth in this, but for example, population growth in the USA is about 1%, just below the global average, and even in the UK where it's only around 0.5%, this is actually the highest it has been since 1962. The distinction between population growth in developing and developed nations is not entirely clear cut. This argument also overlooks the probability that, as the standard of living in developing nations improves, consumption will increase. So in the long term, population growth matters wherever it happens. This is particularly true if climate change leads to mass migration, as some experts predict.

But what about Malthus? People have always cried "over-population" and yet the predicted collapse hasn't materialised. For 200 years people have worried about nothing. We always find a way to adapt and support our populations. Or do we?

In fact throughout history numerous societies have collapsed in just the way Malthus suggested. In good years they expanded to the absolute limit of their resources, then in bad years, with no spare capacity to fall back on, they collapsed. This happened to the Mayans, the Sumerians, to the Ancestral Pueblo culture; it happened in Angkor, it happened to the Nasca, to the Olmecs. More recently it caused the American dustbowl, made a desert of Ethiopia and caused famine from potato blight in Ireland. Today, according to the World Food Programme, about 18,000 children die every day as a

consequence of malnutrition and hunger-related diseases. It might be difficult to persuade them that we always manage to adapt and support our populations.

### So if population growth is a problem, what should be done?

The UNFPA has a broad idea that improving education and healthcare will empower women so they can genuinely decide how many children they want to have. Improving education and healthcare has to be a good thing, whatever its impact, but is it a strategy for securing the future of the global population?

The Optimum Population Trust suggest we pledge to "stop at two". In a time when long-haul flights are frowned upon, and four-wheel-drive vehicles in cities look like unnecessary extravagance, is it becoming socially unacceptable to have large families?

China's controversial one child policy is cited as preventing 250-400 million births since 1978. In fact, because of a number of exemptions and because contravention of the policy is simply punished with a fine, the average number of children per family is 1.8, and the population in China is growing at 0.6%, faster than in the UK.

The truth is that we haven't talked about population growth enough to know how people feel about it, or to formulate a consensus about what should be done. This lack of debate has been described as a "silent lie". Jonathon Porritt (former Director of Friends of the Earth in Britain) said, "I shall continue to point out to many of my colleagues that their continuing silence on the links between population, climate change and social justice is actually a betrayal of everything that they stand for – however 'politically correct' they may imagine it to be."

Having a proper conversation about what, if anything should be done is long overdue. On June 10, in London's St Pancras Church, a panel of speakers including: Aubrey Manning OBE, Journalist Fred Pearce, Professor John Guillebaud and the Revd Jeremy Caddick will take part in a one-and-a-half hour public debate to discuss what should be done about rising population. They will tackle controversial topics like; Whose problem is it? What are the demographics? What are the possible solutions? What are the practical problems? What ethical issues might be involved? Should we do anything at all?

I don't know what we should do about rising population, or whether we should do anything at all. But I do know we need to start talking about it.

*Tickets for the June 10 debate are £6 and can be bought online at [www.genememear.blogspot.com](http://www.genememear.blogspot.com) or by emailing [info@gandaharvie.com](mailto:info@gandaharvie.com).*

Gregor Harvie is an artist and architect. He has a PhD in environmental design and in 2000 was Director of Earth Day at the Millennium Dome in London. He is currently working on GENE MEME, an art installation and outreach programme about the history and biology of population growth.

#### Comments (5)

**Nigel**

April 27, 2010  
86.144.158.187  
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...  
What a cogent and thoughtful article. I am definitely up for coming to the debate.

**Christina**

May 05, 2010  
78.145.83.3  
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...  
Perhaps a sustainable population would make the aim of single planet consumption an achievable or even surpassable one.

**Dermot**

May 22, 2010  
80.68.90.19  
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Votes: +0

...  
I hope it is going to be a real debate and not one-sided.

**Janet**

May 27, 2010  
212.104.155.91  
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...  
Brilliant stuff. I would love to attend the debate. Wouldn't it be fantastic to have our new leaders (Mr Cameron and Mr Clegg) inputs? Especially as the Conservatives recognise overpopulation as an issue, while the LibDems regard any mention of it as an infringement of civil liberties. That would indeed be a debate!

**Peter Saloni**

May 28, 2010  
192.75.17.115  
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...  
Malthus could not possibly have appreciated the temporary increase of food production that would be facilitated by our access to abundant, cheap BUT non renewable fossil fuel energy during several centuries after his death; this geological energy subsidy is now in the process of diminishing, so that we will again be limited to the energy we can harvest from sunlight.

I have been interested in the relationship between agriculture and population growth for over 40 years, and I started writing about the necessity to curb population growth BEFORE the new 'green revolution' (fossil fuel, fertilizer, irrigation and pesticide dependent) crop varieties were released by Norman Borlaug and his compatriots. Borlaug himself opined that the new crop wheat and rice varieties, being produced by CYMITT in Mexico and the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines in the early 1970s, were only stop gap measures – and that the necessity to constantly increase food production would never end if global population growth was not halted.

I believe that we are now seeing the ramifications of a global 10,000 year old debt crisis (PONZI SCHEME) characterized by the creation of money that supposedly represented actual wealth = the ability to produce food and fibre for the needs of the Earth's human population. This 10,000 year old 'PONZI SCHEME' has incorrectly assumed that environmental services such as soil fertility and other supposedly renewable natural resources were externalities with infinite capacity that need not be accounted for.

I have proposed that humanity "overstepped" the long-term sustainable productive capacity of the soils -- upon which it relies for its sustenance -- as soon as cultivation agriculture was adopted.

My thesis suggests the first and most important resource humans used non renewably (long before fossil fuel depletion/peak oil) is the arable soil on the planet; soil mining by cultivation agriculture began ~ 10,000 years ago. If my thesis is correct -- then the 'population bomb', that continues to make natural resource management problematic, exploded a long, long time ago, see:

'Long term agricultural overshoot'

<http://www.theoilrum.com/node/6048>

My 'guesstimate' for sustainable human numbers in the 100s of millions, if correct, suggests that the present global population has so far overshoot the carrying capacity of its supporting ecosystems that most analyses of the relationship of excessive human numbers to SPECIFIC ASPECTS of environmental damage are simply indulgent academic exercises.

There are more people on the planet (and have been for millennia) than it can sustainably support.

Many of us have concluded that even TWO CHILD FAMILIES -- that would only slowly stabilize the human population -- are not an adequate response to this problem; we require the VOLUNTARY adoption of NO or ONE CHILD PER FAMILY behavior to orchestrate the Population DECLINE that is necessary now.

Comments, constructive criticisms and suggestions are welcome

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