

Population growth must be curbed

Introduction

In May 2011 the United Nations released its 2010 Revision of the World Population Prospects^[1] in which they raised their previous demographic projections, estimating that world population would reach seven billion on October 31, 2011. Other estimates vary slightly, for example The US Census Bureau^[2] estimates that we will reach the seven billion mark in February 2012, but the consensus is that world population is rising rapidly and is likely to continue to do so, with expectations that it will exceed nine billion by the year 2050^[3]. While some see this as something to celebrate^{[4],[5]} others see the increase in human numbers as a threat to our prosperity or even to our very existence^{[6],[7]}. This debate has raged for more than two centuries with one side seeing a direct connection between population growth and a general *improvement* in the human condition and the other predicting environmental and economic disaster.

[1] <http://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/index.htm>

[2] <http://www.census.gov/main/www/popclock.html>

[3] <http://www.weboffate.com/prediction/World-population-by-2050-may-grow-to-92-billion/6257/>

[4] <http://www.christiannewswire.com/news/2632818048.html>

[5] <http://www.fool.co.uk/news/investing/2011/10/25/why-investors-should-celebrate-a-population-of-7-b.aspx>

[6] <http://overpopulation.org/>

[7] <http://www.biocab.org/Overpopulation.html>

Fears about population growth

There is a long history of fear about the consequences of a growing human population. As far back as 1798, Thomas Malthus predicted that it would lead to falling wages and a food supply crisis in his *Essay on the Principle of Population*^[8]. Today concerns about population tend to focus on the scarcity of a variety of resources: The global food crisis of 2008 saw these worries inflated as prices of produce such as wheat, rice and cooking oil soared, leading many commentators to conclude that overpopulation was the problem^[9]; some make a direct connection between rising oil prices and too many people^[10]; others link other environmental concerns such as loss of biodiversity and climate change with the size of the human population, arguing for example that more people means a greater carbon footprint^[11]. Pressure group Population Matters^[12], formerly the Optimum Population Trust, is typical of those who bring all of these concerns together, leading them to promote improved provision of family planning and sex education, better education and rights for women. Even luminaries such as David Attenborough and Jane Goodall have out their names to the call for fewer people, becoming patrons of Population Matters^[13]. US campaign group Clean Water Action Council make similar claims, arguing that population growth causes problems related to scarce water, scarce cropland, fisheries, forests, global warming and species extinction^[14].

[8] <http://www.econlib.org/library/Malthus/malPlong.html>

[9] <http://www.globalissues.org/article/758/global-food-crisis-2008>

[10] http://www.culturechange.org/overpopulation_resources.html

[11] <http://colette-mcenery-lane.suite101.com/overpopulation-and-climate-change-a194798>

[12] <http://populationmatters.org/>

[13] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/earth/8174740/The-Tarzan-and-Jane-of-the-animal-world.html>

[14] <http://www.cwac.net/population/>

Arguments for population growth

The view that population growth is a problem is far from universal – just as fears about human numbers have been around for centuries, the humanist idea that more people means a better world

has been around since the Eighteenth Century. Following this tradition, some contemporary humanists argue that more human minds means more potential solutions to problems^[15]. Some proponents of population growth point out that the densely populated countries are consistently richer than those that are less densely populated, and suggest that high population density causes wealth, not poverty^[16]. Others point out that, even though Malthus was proved wrong in his assumptions, similar theories have emerged in almost every period in the last two hundred years. They suggest that these views have generally reflected other concerns of those who express them, from the 19th-century campaigners in Britain who published illegal manuals on birth control because of their derogatory view of the working classes to the Indian elites who sterilised eight million people in a single year in the late 1970s^[17]. One key point made is that it is a mistake to naturalise *social* problems such as inequality and the global uneven distribution of wealth, which the population control proponents invariably do^[18]. Even the topic of food production is far less clear cut than some anti-population campaigners would suggest: some scientists argue that feeding nine billion people is perfectly compatible with sustainable food production provided we follow a path which includes improving crop production, using water and nutrients more intelligently, reducing food waste, dedicating croplands to direct human food production and halting farmland expansion^[19].

[15] <http://thegreatdebate.org.uk/BigItUpProc.html>

[16] <http://www.pregnantpause.org/overpop/gnp.htm>

[17] http://www.economist.com/node/11402576?story_id=11402576

[18] <http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php/site/article/11159/>

[19] <http://www.enn.com/agriculture/article/43397>

Women and population control

Much of the discussion of population control has linked it to the plight of women in developing countries, in particular discussing women's control over their own fertility^[20]. However, while most agree that better access to family planning, whether it be through contraception or abortion, is a positive development, there is strong disagreement with how this squares with the goals of population control advocates. Some argue that improved access to birth control means better health for women as well as slower growth in population, both of which have a positive impact on economic development^[21] and on the environment^[22] while others question the validity of the assumptions underlying these theories, and accuse their proponents of being racist and sexist^{[23],[24]}.

[20] <http://www.unfpa.org/pds/index.html>

[21] <http://www.un.org/popin/icpd/conference/offeng/poa.html>

[22] <http://www.bmj.com/content/337/bmj.39575.691343.80.full>

[23] <http://worldviews.igc.org/awpguide/popula.html>

[24] <http://cwpe.org/node/71>

An emotive debate

Whether considering the argument that we should limit population growth for simple pragmatic reasons related to environmental issues such as climate change^[25] or that we should distrust those that want a smaller population as they seek to deny to others the rights and privileges they demand for themselves^[26] it is clear that the population is an emotive one that is worth engaging with if only to clarify one's own position on being human in this changing world.

[25] <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/apr/15/zoe-williams-population-growth>

[26] http://www.mercatornet.com/articles/view/wish_you_werent_here1/

Other links:

State of world population 2011

<http://foweb.unfpa.org/SWP2011/reports/EN-SWOP2011-FINAL.pdf>

Population seven billion: UN sets out challenges

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-15459643>

The world at seven billion: Fergus Walsh asks what the increase in population expected over the next decades might mean, 25 October 2011

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-15445092>

For the motion

Population Matters: Website of pressure group who believe that human population needs to be greatly reduced.

<http://populationmatters.org/>

World Overpopulation Awareness: a non-profit web publication seeking to inform people about overpopulation, unsustainability, and overconsumption

<http://overpopulation.org/>

Unique Carbon Offsets Scheme Helps Africans Put Their Case: The Population/Climate Change Connection

<http://populationmatters.org/2011/news/unique-carbon-offsets-scheme-helps-africans-put-case/>

Overpopulation is the biggest threat to our climate by Roger Martin

<http://blogs.reuters.com/great-debate-uk/2009/10/16/overpopulation-is-the-biggest-threat-to-our-climate/>

Why we need population reduction by Adrian Stott

<http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php?site/article/6559/>

Against the motion

Overpopulation.Com: Website dedicated to debunking the arguments against population growth

<http://www.overpopulation.com/>

Is population growth a problem? If so, what should be done about it? If not, why has it become a major issue?

<http://www.worldwrite.org.uk/ghana/ghanapopulation.html>

New Limits to Growth Revive Malthusian Fears

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB120613138379155707.html>

The coming population bust by Jeff Jacoby

http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/editorial_opinion/oped/articles/2008/06/18/the_coming_population_bust/

The rise and rise of the New Malthusianism by Frank Furedi

http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php?site/reviewofbooks_article/5213/