

The Environmental Politics of Population and Overpopulation

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Abstract: Numerous environmental theorists characterize human population growth as an unsustainable pandemic accountable for a variety of ecological problems. However, regional consumption patterns amplify the environmental impact of a population, making the two factors (consumption and population) difficult to evaluate separately. Many environmentalists advocate for wider distribution of family planning services, contraception, and sexual education to prevent population growth. Meanwhile, some rights advocates insist that population growth is the symptom of larger cultural injustices and that contraceptives are inappropriate tools to address these underlying inequities.

Numerous population and environmental theorists characterize human population growth as an unsustainable pandemic accountable for a variety of ecological problems. However, regional consumption patterns amplify the environmental impact of a population, making the two factors (consumption and population) difficult to evaluate separately. For instance, a billion subsistence farmers may instigate less environmental impact than a much smaller quantity of rich consumers. Furthermore, controversy surrounds calls for population reduction. Many environmentalists advocate for wider distribution of family planning services, contraception, and sexual education to prevent population growth. Meanwhile, some rights advocates insist that population growth is the symptom of larger cultural injustices and that contraceptives are inappropriate tools to address these underlying inequities.

In 1970, the global population stood at 3.7 billion people. Today it is nearly twice that sum. The population of humans is currently expanding by about 1.5 million per week – roughly equivalent to adding the population of San Francisco to the world's numbers every 86 hours. The United States Census Bureau expects the world population will peak at about 9 billion by 2043. Such a large number of humans might not cause a problem if everyone were simple subsistence farmers. But clearly this is not the case. Most rich-world inhabitants each consume much more than a subsistence farmer in terms of products, services, and energy. These lofty consumption practices intensify a population's impact on the biosphere. How much, precisely, is a matter of contention.

Environmental theorists debate the impact of population and consumption on the global ecosystem. Cornucopian theorists believe that technological innovation will allow for continuing growth despite a growing population with high levels of consumption. However, most environmentalists criticize population growth and high consumption patterns as problematic over the long term. Some argue that human population will surpass the maximum carrying capacity of the earth's bounty. Others argue it already has. Presumably, in order for all humans on the planet to enjoy middle-class American levels of consumption, multiple planets would be required to provide the requisite natural resources. But we have only one planet. So, would a smaller population be ideal?

Considering an Optimum Population

For hundreds of years, population theorists have posited optimum population levels that are ideal for the earth to support over many generations. Their estimates range dramatically from fewer than one billion to over 1,000 billion. The nonprofit Optimum Population Trust advocates shrinking the population over time to between one and two billion people, a population they argue the earth can support while affording the potential for every inhabitant to live at a high standard of living. Activists frequently call upon such optimum population estimates to justify campaigns for either shrinking or expanding the population.

Mainstream politicians, journalists, and academics frequently avoid discussing population issues since notions about population are often seen as being politically or ideologically motivated. As a result, population debates are generally argued from the fringes. Some groups characterize population growth as a Ponzi scheme, whereby increasing numbers of youth are constantly required to support older generations. Anti-immigration activists mobilize overpopulation fears in an attempt to justify legislative actions against immigration. Environmental organizations generally cite population growth as an unsustainable stress on natural ecosystems and resources. Some argue that population growth is a problem for poor nations to address while others point out that rich-world populations instigate the bulk of environmental harms.

Population Dynamics

The United States' population is growing more rapidly than expected. In 1984 the United States Census Bureau predicted that the nation would contain 309 million residents by 2050. But, the nation's population surpassed that estimate forty years early. Revised population estimates for 2050 range from 420 to 500 million.

Shrinking the human population over time is not as straightforward as it might seem. Even if the global birth rate were to drop from the current average of 2.6 children per couple to the replacement rate of about 2.1 children per couple, the world population would continue to expand for 70 years before stabilizing at about 13 billion inhabitants. Why? Several population momentum factors temporarily sustain growth even as birth rates drop. For instance, a disproportionately large proportion of the global population is young. Forty

percent of the world's population is under 20 years old and will presumably be around for quite some time. Also, humans are now living longer than their ancestors. In 1900, humans survived an average of just 30 years. Today, the global average lifespan is 67 years. Rich-world residents live an average of 78 years. Medical and longevity advancements will likely extend life spans further.

Populations are aging in several European nations and Japan, leaving fewer young workers to support a sizeable number of elderly individuals. Declining tax income combined with increasing eldercare costs threaten funding for established social welfare systems. Economists are closely monitoring these countries to determine if and how they can maintain their high standards of living during this impending demographic transformation. Meanwhile, social scientists point to several benefits afforded to nations as their populations age. While these nations must pay more for eldercare, they also have fewer children to birth, cloth, bath, house, and educate. Demographers maintain that crime rates tend to fall as populations age since younger people perpetrate most crimes. As a result, aging regions can spend less on policing, crime investigations, and jails.

Contemporary Population Debates

Past attempts to control population levels for various political, economic, social, and environmental endeavors form a long and contentious history. In the early 19th century, Thomas Robert Malthus argued in his book, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, that while population can expand exponentially, food supply is limited to grow at a slower linear rate. He observed that large swells in population were typically followed by famine as a result of limited food supplies. He therefore argued against benefits or charity for the poor, citing that such generosity removed natural population checks. Numerous political leaders evoked his theories in order to justify cutting social welfare programs. Charles Dickens modeled a character, Scrooge, after Malthus.

With the advent of modern agriculture, fertilizers, and the green revolution, Malthus' theory no longer held. Though over the years, population scholars refashioned some of his arguments in efforts to justify population reduction programs. During the 1960s and 1970s, rich nations prescribed and funded population control initiatives in the developing world. Human rights advocates criticized these top-down programs for framing women as wombs. In the most disturbing cases women were sterilized without their full consent.

Today, contraception proponents argue that preventing population growth does not have to be coercive. They maintain that contraception has long formed an effective separation between sex and conception. In a variety of contexts, popular demand for contraceptive devices increases as they become more easily available, especially when accompanied by fertility education. Contraception advocates point to Costa Rica, Iran, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, countries that have cut their overall fertility rates in half by providing basic fertility education and contraception choices. Still, throughout the world many women are denied access to contraception by their husbands, mother-in-laws, religious authorities, and even

medical providers. Contraception proponents advocate for not only greater access to contraceptive devices worldwide, but also education to correct misinformation regarding their use.

Even though most rights advocates agree that contraception access is an important issue, many argue that focusing on contraception obscures the much broader struggle for comprehensive women's rights. They envision high fertility rates as a byproduct of broader economic and gender inequities. Rights advocates maintain that premising family planning initiatives on reproductive and human rights, rather than birth rate reduction, will yield the greatest benefits to women, their families, and the environment.

Population concerns are broadening to include potential risks of climate change and related impacts on human civilizations. In 1994, rich nations pledged to fund climate initiatives chosen by poor nations. Over subsequent decades, poor nations identified the need to address local population growth. Grassroots organizations emphasize three central concerns. First, they maintain that population growth endangers important natural resources such as forests and topsoil. Second, a growing population increases demand for limited resources such as food and water. Third, large populations amplify human vulnerability to natural disaster. Local governments identify both reproductive rights and human rights initiatives as central to addressing these extended challenges.

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SEE ALSO: Environmental Justice Movements; Immigration Movements; Social Action, Global and Regional

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