

Bursting Point

The Population Time Bomb

By Graham Strouts

“It is a simple logical truth that, short of mass emigration into space, with rockets taking off at the rate of several million per second, uncontrolled birth-rates are bound to lead to horribly increased death-rates. It is hard to believe that this simple truth is not understood by those leaders who forbid their followers to use effective contraceptive methods. They express a preference for ‘natural’ methods of population limitation, and a natural method is exactly what they are going to get. It is called starvation.”

~Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*

Population is a sensitive subject. It is not only political leaders who are reluctant to address it; most environmentalists also feel it is quite beyond their remit in working towards sustainability. It is often seen as an unmentionable subject, something only touched upon by racists and xenophobes— which is exactly why environmentalists need to engage in the debate.

For example, piecemeal responses to climate change which encourage individuals to save energy by changing light-bulbs or turning off appliances may be more than outweighed by population increase. Simply stated, more people equals more carbon emitters. This obvious fact is entirely missing from most public debate about the issue.

Global over-population is becoming more and more pressing every day and needs to take centre stage alongside resource depletion and climate change as one of the great issues of our time.

Two Sides of the Human



Footprint

The environmental crisis is essentially a result of the total human footprint on the Earth’s systems. This is a combination of both population and consumption rates. There is just one planet, and its ability to sustain life is being sorely tested by both our lifestyle and our numbers.

The world is divided like never before, polarized between an over-consuming Western minority and an over-populated poor majority, the latter including 2 billion on the bread line.

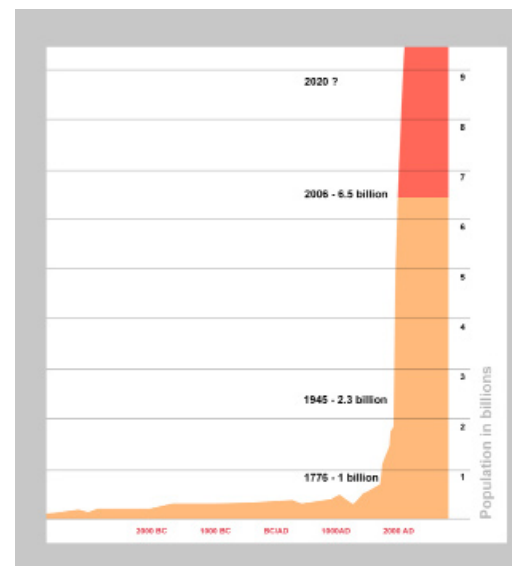
According to the Worldwatch Institute, the 12 percent of the world’s population that lives in North America and Western Europe accounts for 60 percent of private consumption spending, while the one-third living in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa accounts for only 3.2 percent. At the same time, the World Wildlife Fund’s Living Planet Report reveals that humans already consume 20 percent more natural resources than the earth can produce.

Conventional environmental wisdom holds that as the poor increase their standards of living, and place more importance on the education and eman-

ipation of women, they will naturally reduce their birth rates.

Unfortunately, in some parts of the world increased affluence is leading to a baby-boom first. This happened in Saudi Arabia over the last 20 years and is happening in Ireland now as people (perhaps belatedly) respond to the feel-good factor of the Celtic Tiger. Reduction of per capita consumption in some countries has been outweighed by sheer increase in numbers in others.

Immigration from poor to rich coun-





tries will naturally lead to those people increasing their consumption levels as they increase their economic opportunities. Also, in many wealthy countries increasing the population is still considered a good thing... even though they are already consuming far more resources than is sustainable.

A Rising Tide

It took nearly the whole of human history for the world's population to reach the first 1 billion human beings. This occurred around 1850, some 50 years after English economist Thomas Robert Malthus first warned that food production could not keep up with population growth.

“The world’s population now stands at approximately 6.7 billion, and it is forecast to rise to 9.2 billion by 2050.”

The second billion was reached soon after the World War I, and by the mid 1950s, it had grown by another billion. Paul Ehrlich wrote *The Population Bomb* in 1968 when world population stood at 3.5 billion. It had risen to over 4.5 billion when China began its policy of one child per family. At the turn of

the century, the 6 billion mark was passed. The world's population now stands at approximately 6.7 billion, and it is forecast to rise to 9.2 billion by 2050. The ecological and human impact of such an increase is almost unimaginable.

Each year, some 80 million more people are added to the planet, each one requiring food, shelter and clothing; each one with a legitimate right to increase their standard of living and seek a better material life; and each one likely themselves to reproduce and thus continue to contribute to the overall human impact on the planet.

Growth through the Oil Age

The role of fossil fuels in the exponential increase in human numbers over the last 150 years cannot be overstated.

While for most of human history, total numbers had been restricted by much the same effects of nature that prevent the over-expansion of any other species, the exploitation of fossil fuels has let the genie out of the bottle.

In particular, oil has allowed humanity to cheat natural selection. It has fuelled the machinery and farming practices of modern agriculture, dramatically increasing produce yields, temporarily delaying the Malthusian prediction of famine. There are, however, warning signs that this 'golden age' may be coming to an end.

As scientists battle to stay one step ahead of pests and viruses capable of wiping out the monocultures that industrial farming favours, environmental destruction and climate change is reducing the amount of arable land globally, even as the world's population continues its inexorable rise.

As we stand at the point of peak oil, the prospect of dwindling energy supplies looms. We can only assume that mother nature will step in to correct any imbalance in The Earth's carrying capacity that fossil fuels have created. Our population will certainly peak and decline within the next 50 years.

The question is whether this will be from a series of famines and other catastrophic events or in a more orderly fashion. Will we be able to move towards a truly sustainable culture that is able to regulate its population as well as its consumption?



The Post-Modern Delusion

The short era of cheap fossil fuels that has emerged in the last 150 years has created whole societies in the West that have been able to rid themselves of many of the worst aspects of hunger and poverty, and provide welfare for all. This has allowed a culture to emerge with a concern for the plight of those less fortunate. This concern, however, has carried with it a tragic and hopeless delusion: that goodwill can bring peace and prosperity to all regardless of the size of the population.

This ideology has fuelled decades of programmes of aid to Africa and other famine-torn regions of the world. This goodwill aid has entirely failed to meet the goal of eradicating hunger. This is partially due to the fact that the population continues to increase in these regions.

According to one UN report, The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2005, the number of undernourished people in the world declined only slightly from roughly 824 million in 1990-92 to around 815 million in 2000-02. The West must face the bitter reality that the provision of famine relief aid in the absence of population control strategies will only lead to more starving people.

What Can be Done?

“Mounting population pressure does have a potential safety valve: recognition and rational analyses of the danger, leading to remedial action (birth control worldwide), but for half a century the valve has been tightly closed by a taboo. The subject is so ‘sensitive’ that few people are prepared to face it. Birth control is, however, humankind’s best hope for a less painful future.”

~William Stanton,
The Rapid Rise in Human Population 1750-2000

Environmental educators and activists can help create a more sustainable world by addressing the world’s population crisis. Practical actions can be taken. Here are a few suggestions:

Start the conversation. Everyone interested in sustainability needs to incorporate the population issue into their work, however challenging this may be.

Inform and educate others. Increased



Not Science fiction: Vertical development in Dubai

Understanding of the issues surrounding population growth will help lead to a culture in which the need to voluntarily limit human numbers by having less children is recognised as being integral to the creation of a sustainable population with a reasonable standard of living for all. Coercive population control strategies are not helpful.

Support relevant organisations. The Optimum Population Trust (www.optimumpopulation.org), for example, offers educational material, and it runs campaigns for greater awareness around sustainable population issues.

Those who wish to support charities in the Third World should consider Marie Stopes International (www.mariestopes.org.uk), which works to provide better birth-control options and sexual and reproductive health resources in the developing world.

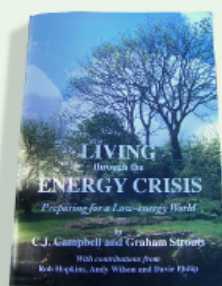
References

William Catton (1980) Overshoot
Paul and Anne Ehrlich (1990)- The Population Explosion
William Stanton (2000) The Rapid Rise in Human Population 1750-2000

Graham Strouts teaches permaculture at Kinsale Further Education College. He has along term involvement in permaculture, woodland management and environmental education. More recently he has been involved with local responses to Peak Oil and Climate Change. He lives in West Cork where for the last six years he has been developing a smallholding using permaculture methods. See www.zone5.org

Living Through the Energy Crises

- Preparing for a Low-Energy World



by Dr. Colin Campbell, founder of the Association for the Study of Peak Oil and Gas, and Graham Strouts, Lecturer in Permaculture at Kinsale Further Education Centre.

This compact 60 page booklet details the history of fossil fuel discovery, production and consumption, and examines the likely consequences of Peak Oil and fossil fuel depletion. It includes suggested plans of action at individual, community, national and international level.

Available mail order price €12.99 inclusive of postage to any address world-wide. Visit www.zone5.org to order on line. Alternatively email graham@zone5.org or phone 027 66931.