

ENVIRONMENTALLY SPEAKING

Peter Schwartzman

Is the world overpopulated? Perhaps, not

As we sailed into the new millennium, humans crossed a threshold never before witnessed in our species. We flew past the 6 billion mark in number. This is an impressive figure, but not one that we can easily appreciate, unless we are Bill Gates or ExxonMobil.

Let's try to understand how incredibly large this number is. Consider that this article has ~9000 letters. Thus, it would take more than 650,000 copies of it to produce enough letters to represent all humans. Or, put in other terms, consider that if all the humans were to hold hands side by side, our species would circumscribe the equator nearly 14 times! And perhaps, most horrifying, if we all were to move to Texas (the 2nd largest state in our nation), each one of us would only have a theoretical room 35 ft by 35 ft to ourselves—assuming no room for other forms of life or human "necessities" such as airports, lawns, and shopping malls.

So now that you have an idea of how big a number 6,000,000,000 is, are you even more convinced that human population has become too large? The evidence, at first glance, appears overwhelming. The world's population has grown from 1 billion in the early 1800s to over 6 billion today. Two nations in the world (namely, China and India) themselves each have more than 1 billion people now. According to United Nations' statistics, around 2 billion people (1 in 3) suffer from malnutrition and dietary deficiencies and more than 800 million (1 in 7) are chronically malnourished. Add to this that resources are becoming depleted and ecosystems (and their animal and plant residents) are being decimated. Worse yet, if world populations continue to grow at the rates observed in 2000, the world's population will surpass 24 billion people by 2100; a very unlikely event given recent reductions in world growth rates (current projections put us at about 12 billion). With all of this evidence is there any doubt that population has grown too large. However, even though the world's human population appears to be overabundant, "super-sized," or "gargantuan," this tendency to think about the world problems as largely driven by population pressures, as so many thoughtful people do, has its own serious problems and limitations.

Population only tells part of the story. People are malnourished not because there isn't food but because they aren't getting the food that exists. On a world scale, there

is more than enough food to feed everyone, even today. Massive starvation, as observed in Ethiopia in 1973 and Bangladesh in 1974, didn't occur because food wasn't available. These famines, and many others, occurred because large numbers of the population didn't have sufficient funds to purchase foods, even though food was available—hence a question of distribution not limitation. Current world debts have now reached proportions that developing countries now spend \$13 on debt repayment for every \$1 it receives in grants (Global Issues)—an economic climate that makes it extremely difficult for countries to provide for its citizenry. While some countries, including the United States, store away surplus grain production as a security blanket, many human beings don't get enough to eat on a regular basis. In many developing countries, given its rewarding economic payoffs, large landowners harvest export crops (such as coffee and tobacco) rather than food crops for local people. Also, and possibly most damning to the reading audience, a diet rich in meat requires nearly ten times the land than that of a strict vegetarian's diet. Nearly 40 percent of U.S. land is used for grazing livestock (which accounts for about two-thirds of agricultural land). While some of this land is more fit for free-range grazing than vegetable crops, much of it would be many times more productive if grains were grown rather than "meats." In a very interesting study conducted by the The Union of Concerned Scientists, red meat is 18 times more polluting to our waterways and 20 times more wasteful of land usage than an equivalent amount (by weight) of pasta; surprising as well, poultry's numbers are 11 and 2 respectively.¹ Clearly, a broader view of the problems concomitant with population needs to be taken.

People's willingness to think of population as a key world problem stems from their (albeit perhaps unconscious) desire to find blame in others rather than themselves. Where do the "overpopulated" communities come from? Where is the population growth the greatest? China and India, two of the more than 170 countries in the world, house approximately 38 percent of the people! The fastest growing continent is Africa where the majority of countries still have total fertility rates (TFRs, defined as the average number of births per woman) of over 5, whereas Europe and the United States have TFRs less than half that

value. Seemingly, as it is often acknowledged, the population problem finds its source, not where "we" live, but where "they" live.

Unfortunately, a mindset that sees "others" as the problem redirects energy and focus in directions that less than fruitful. As long as someone other than us are the problem, as the statistics above seem to indicate, then we can be seen, and often are in any self-describing moment, to represent the "proper," "meaningful" way of living. It is as if only these "other" people would adopt a proper lifestyle, namely ours, then not only would they be better off but the entire world would be too—the forests, the rivers, the oceans, and the people could once again flourish. This position, or ideology, reeks of complacency and, worse, maliciousness.

If we allow ourselves to see beyond the "obvious" (i.e., population), we begin to see other, perhaps more important, contributors to human suffering, environmental damage and misuse of resources. Populations are considered problematic in size or growth because they consume things—either food, water, oil, land, air, or lumber. It is clear from this point of view that consumption is likely closer to the root of many "environmental" problems, because if populations didn't consume then the problems, such as clear air, clean water, and habitat destruction, would naturally reduce sharply. Furthermore, when we begin to look at consumption, rather than just population, we begin to look more at ourselves, and our consumptive behavior, rather than to others, and their population "craze." We can derive empowerment with this switch in focus because we can decide to make changes in our own lives rather than pushing (some would say forcing) our values on others.

Another limitation of focusing on population size derives from the common responses offered for reducing it. Most birth control forms are invasive of women's bodies and often have significant side effects. Consider that three widely used forms of birth control—namely, Depo-Provera, Norplant and sterilization—in the population "problem" areas of the world have major health effects on women, including cancer, irregular bleeding, and reduce libido. Often, poorly-educated, economically-challenged women throughout the world are easy targets to medical programs and authorities. The medical personnel behind these "health" projects are so convinced that population is a major cause of human problems that they support inherently sexist, classist, invasive and single-pronged policies. Worse yet, most of the population "control" devices do not prevent the spread of STDs. This only gives further support to the claim that the "health" of the receiving parties isn't a primary concern of national and international fertility-focused programs.

The population "problem" is additionally clouded by a more pernicious foe. We would have to be blind not to recognize that the people that are "overpopulating" the world happen to be people of color, that is, non-"whites." Some of you might immediately respond that that our disdain for these "overpopulating" people has nothing to do with the color of their skin. And it may be comforting to believe this, but given that our world has suffered from overtly racist tendencies for the past several centuries, we certainly should question the racist, discriminatory motives and dimensions of global population policies as well.

Lastly, let's assume that world population is overabundant. Then we would be forced

to ask ourselves, "How many people should the world have?" In ecology there is a concept known as the *carrying capacity*, which, in layperson terms, means the maximum number of people that our world can support without suffering greatly. What is the world's carrying capacity? Many scholars have attempted to calculate this, and the bulk of estimates range between two billion and sixty-four billion (Cohen). According to a world expert on this matter, no single number exists because "human carrying capacity is dynamic and uncertain ... [it] depends on natural constraints [such as food, water, livable land] and human choices [such as] about economies, environment, values and politics" (Cohen). Apparently, answering the "how many" question requires that we deal with serious questions of equity (i.e., distribution of resources) and human rights. Thus, even if we consider population a significant source of our world's problems, we aren't necessarily closer to dealing with the underlining decisions that are required to make headway, especially not if we hope to do so without being blatantly racist, sexist, and selfish.

Ultimately I have presented evidence that population isn't a cause of problems, per se, but rather a symptom of more systemic problems—distribution of power, wealth, resources, sexism, racism, etc. If we continue to focus on population rather than these other problems, we will be treating the symptom rather than the cause. Analogously, and closer to home, if when we contract encephalitis from a mosquito in Chicago, we only provide medicines to the victims, without ascertaining why this disease is present in our neighborhoods in the first place, we have made a critical error and people are going to continue to contract it. In another example, recognize that when we find out that our prisons are full, we don't respond that our population is too big, but rather we, all too often, resign ourselves that more prisons need to be built. However, as long as prisoners keep being "produced" by our society (via our laws, our social neglects, our revengeful nature), we will continue to need more and more prisons. Perhaps, rather than chanting that overpopulation is such a terrible problem so much, we should ask what economic, political, and social forces exist worldwide that encourage people to have children that are almost guaranteed to suffer throughout their lives and, more illuminating, why must children born today suffer—when food is available, immunizations are available, and technology seems so advanced. It is time to take a refreshed, rejuvenated, and more fully informed look at the "population" problem.

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Global Issues Website. www.globalissues.org

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