Population growth must be addressed with insight

Contributed by Michael Poremba and Jan Lundberg
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Excessive resource consumption is a huge risk for the ecosystems on this planet. It's basic math than population is a key factor in the equation. Forcing everyone to scale down to the consumption level of a Buddhist monk is realistic. Cutting all consumption in half brings the same situation around again next time the population doubles again.

Denial of overpopulation being a real problem seems more than just ignorance. Perhaps it's based on feeling threatened. The claim that population can easily prompt the question "well someone will have to die -- who is it?" This approach is mistaken, but an easy mistake for people to make.

Once the awareness of overpopulation is explicit, competition for resources would increase, and things would get hairy. Minority groups and ideologies could become more directly threatened by dominant ones. Groups that have been threatened in the past or are already vulnerable would feel particularly sensitive to this question of "who do we least need or want".

Perhaps as we explore the topic of overpopulation we need to remain sensitive to the tendency to start competing with one another for survival. People already sensitive about survival may naturally become defensive around this topic.

- By Michael Poremba. Michael was a founding organizer of the San Francisco Postcarbon group and a producer of popular "The Oil Age" poster. In the above he was responding to a San Francisco peak oil email list discussion triggered by an Alternet column "Stop the Tired Overpopulation Hysteria". In so doing he brought the following news story to the list's attention:

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Global crisis 'to strike by 2030'

By Christine McGourty

Growing world population will cause a "perfect storm" of food, energy and water shortages by 2030, the UK government chief scientist has warned.

By 2030 the demand for resources will create a crisis with dire consequences, Prof John Beddington said.

Demand for food and energy will jump 50% by 2030 and for fresh water by 30%, as the population tops 8.3 billion, he told a conference in London.

Climate change will exacerbate matters in unpredictable ways, he added.

'Complacent'

"It's a perfect storm," Prof Beddington told the Sustainable Development UK 09 conference.

"There's not going to be a complete collapse, but things will start getting really worrying if we don't tackle these problems."

Prof Beddington said the looming crisis would match the current one in the banking sector.

"My main concern is what will happen internationally, there will be food and water shortages," he said.

"We're relatively fortunate in the UK; there may not be shortages here, but we can expect prices of food and energy to rise."

The United Nations Environment Programme predicts widespread water shortages across Africa, Europe and Asia by 2025.

The amount of fresh water available per head of the population is expected to decline sharply in that time.

The issue of food and energy security rose high on the political agenda last year during a spike in oil and commodity prices.

Genetically-modified

Prof Beddington said the concern now - when prices have dropped once again - was that the issues would slip back down the domestic and international agenda.

"We can't afford to be complacent. Just because the high prices have dropped doesn't mean we can relax," he said.

Improving agricultural productivity globally was one way to tackle the problem, he added.

At present, 30-40% of all crops are lost due to pest and disease before they are harvested.

Professor Beddington said: "We have to address that. We need more disease-resistant and pest-resistant plants and better practices, better harvesting procedures.

"Genetically-modified food could also be part of the solution. We need plants that are resistant to drought and salinity - a mixture of genetic modification and conventional plant breeding.

Better water storage and cleaner energy supplies are also essential, he added.

Prof Beddington is chairing a subgroup of a new Cabinet Office task force set up to tackle food security.

But he said the problem could not be tackled in isolation.

He wants policy-makers in the European Commission to receive the same high level of scientific advice as the new US president, Barack Obama.

One solution would be to create a new post of chief science adviser to the European Commission, he suggested.

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More commentary, from Jan Lundberg, Culture Change

4.3 Million Births Set a U.S. Record -- Peak People Reached Already?

The public's attitude about population is shaped by the news media. An Associate Press story appearing in March 19th newspapers was devoid of environmental awareness, going so far as to editorialize in favor of more growth:

The U.S. population is more than replacing itself, a healthy trend.

Interestingly, forty percent of births were to unwed mothers, as of 2007. Much of this is due to teen parenthood which is rising.

The article does not say that the vast majority of U.S. population growth stems from immigration and immigrants' higher fertility rates, although it said Hispanics have the highest rate. However, all racial groups posted higher fertility rates to account for the "Baby Boomlet." The ecological impact is from the U.S.'s being the most wasteful of countries per capita, offering abundance and dreams of wealth. Immigrants who move to the U.S. desire to adopt the U.S.'s high-consumption standard of living. Immigration or the stay of immigrant workers is starting to abate as the U.S. economy "goes south."

The report can lead one to say that the birth rate may have peaked in 2007, as the Recession kicked in and is intensifying. With other factors -- such as peak oil that means less and less farm output from dwindling petroleum -- perhaps population will not only stop growing soon but begin its inevitable and probably sharp decline. A food crisis in 2009 can begin this historic nightmarish process.

The demographic analysis in the AP report confirms Dr. Virginia Abernethy's refutation of the "Demographic Transition," challenged in her book Population Politics. The conventional thinking says that the world needs economic development to start reducing birth rates. However, as Abernethy states and as happened in the 1930s according to the AP report, it is anticipation of boom times that adds to family size, and it is the worry about bad times that limits births.

Meanwhile, population growth is projected by government and academia to keep increasing -- displaying a disregard for the realities of petroleum dependence or the effects of climate extinction.

Portland, Oregon, according to a new study, is "expected" to add another million people by 2030. The pace is to slow down toward that goal along the way, due to the "recession," but supposedly will resume when the "recovery" returns -- a questionable assumption.

Collapse of the economy is discussed only in terms of money and not of population size or of industrial society.

If economic growth means more people, and too many people are lethal for the planet's ecological carrying capacity, clearly the only rational policy is to stop economic growth and contract now in a rational fashion.

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Population Politics: The Choices That Shape Our Future, by Virginia D. Abernethy; Insight Books, 1993.

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