Population Is Popping: Why We Cover Our Ears and Eyes

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As the scientific consensus jells to advise us that economic growth on a finite planet is unsustainable, and anyone can see that maximizing consumption is increasingly disastrous, we must ask ourselves what we do next. The first thing would be to focus humanity on what biology-savvy people see as the basic problem: more and more people being born who consume much more than their ancestors did.

This concern is not in the corporate press or tossed around the typical local pub or bar. Why should population size be so uninteresting to the vast majority?
A small portion of the intelligentsia nevertheless presses on, without fully understanding why the majority seems apathetic and prefers to talk about almost anything else instead. Worse, a satisfactory, commonly agreed-upon solution to population growth has always been lacking.

Endlessly "studying the problem" is a poor approach and clever tactic for inaction. But I believe as an oil industry analyst there is one thing that should be thoroughly aired, if not studied exhaustively, before we can figure out what to do or not do:

Oil consumption has enabled population growth. Natural gas, oil's close fossil-fuel cousin, has been an accomplice. From these forms of petroleum the chemists and marketers have brought forth agricultural chemicals, fuels, packaging, and energy for cooking. The Green Revolution of boosting crop yields, based on petroleum farm-chemicals, hybrid seeds, monocropping and mechanization, around the world in the 20th century was a major factor in what was called the Population Bomb. Moreover, roads and transportation through oil development have been mainly responsible for bringing a given piece of food 1,500 miles, on average, from farm to plate in the U.S.

In 2008 the then-head of the CIA, Gen. Michael Hayden, stated the problem of population growth as well as anyone could. Reporting on vital research on the problem preceded him by decades, and continues. One of the best journals from the many seen by Culture Change is the Pop!ulation Press, that featured Hayden in its most recent editorial on the issue's them, "Fate of the Word." It is nothing new that research and programs come along, or are cut. Christian fundamentalists resent Planned Parenthood in the U.S. But among population activists, governments are constantly chided for their intransigence, economists lambasted for their stupidity, corporations and the ultra-rich reviled for their greed. Despite the population-awareness campaigns, studies and activism, we still we are left with a runaway train representing a "global suicide pact" of endless economic growth, as described by Brent Blackwelder in the Pop!ulation Press spring 2012 issue.

So we need to ask, what do we do? Or a better question might be, can anything be done at all? Perhaps there is something, after all, we can do other than wait for utter collapse with the hope of rebuilding human society in a livable ecosystem. That is a big if, with extinctions and global warming unabated or unabatable. Perhaps we need to give up on hoping for better voluntary behavior and urging logical responses from governments and their transnational corporate puppet masters. What would a person's or a movement's response therefore be, assuming something can be done?

Perhaps the answer is so far, at best, to eliminate that which does not help (at least with some folks). Assuming that one does care, and does not dismiss overpopulation due to cornucopian fantasy, there are competing views regarding the population question. Some citizens focus mainly on U.S. population growth due to immigration. However, the world's population growth would not be solved simply by cutting U.S. population growth. Even though the proponents may not agree with the inadequacy of their program, and they are right that U.S. consumption per capita is detrimental to the planet when multiplied by more consumers, we can dismiss their nationalist "solution" as narrow. There are also misanthropes happy to compare our species to yeast overgrowing the Petrie dish. While it's a helpful analogy, it's not a program for change. One might think, therefore, that the carrying capacity of the ecosystem would be the only rational key for an answer to dealing consciously with the population question. But you might be wrong:

The peak oil movement has tried mightily to gain adherents, by appealing to economic sanity while not identifying itself much with environmentalism. For environmental concern must not be the top priority if one wants to make inroads with the corporate news media or many typical working people. In polls, economic concerns -- often short-term survival --

trump environmental or climate concerns. Studies have shown that the more information people receive on climate change and global warming, the more they are likely to shut down their input and actually care less. But the fact of the matter is that the average person is not very concerned with larger issues. Given a chance to talk about them, they prefer to discuss spectator sports of what a catty woman said in a certain dress. This is largely a function of limited intellectual fertilization of the mind while growing up, usually in a household of very limited education. College degrees mean a greater likelihood of caring enough to have conversations about overpopulation or the science of global warming. But many a less-formally educated person can tend fully toward such concerns and discuss them.

For the initiated, population issues are about demographics, women's rights, economic development, and impacts on ecosystems for subsistence. Yet, none of the usual or obscure ideas about population growth and its dangers have been embraced with any hope of unifying people for success on the population problem. There is no breakthrough concept or event at this moment, if I am correct. I hope I am wrong. In the absence of a promising approach, and no universal one-child ethic saving the world from population growth, some try to make the best of a bad situation by emphasizing the positive aspects of today's changing world. After all, there are developments afoot that we need more of, and the human condition cries out for more reason and justice from what seems to be a stupid, oppressive society. More and more people see the need to come together and maximize skills for post-Oil Age survival.

Case in point:

Energy Bulletin, a major source of peak oil and related information and thought, has been an online publication (EnergyBulletin.net) for the last decade or so. It is soon changing its name and website to Resilience.org. The simplest explanation for the change might be that Energy Bulletin has seen increasing value and promise in the Transition movement, and has thus tried to emphasize transition editorially with its selection of articles. Energy Bulletin may have seen public communication hindered by too much "negative" or depressing information. Anyone can appreciate this possibility regarding outreach and psychology, but Energy Bulletin editors and the publication's parent organization Post Carbon Institute are also trying to crack the tough nut on what people can or should do once they understand there are resource limits for an unsustainable population size. The group's best answer, after much consideration, and despite concerns voiced from contributors and readers of Energy Bulletin on letting go of a good name, seems to be that the surest approach to the crises of peak oil, climate disruption and possible collapse of the economy and much of the ecosystem, is to foster resilience: through local economics, healthy living, restoration of nature, and creating strong communities. This is to do something positive about things we can do something about. We cannot do anything now about population crash if it is about to hit, except perhaps to join in limiting its discussion.

It has long been the position of some, including Culture Change, that all we can do for the world in collapse-mode is to promote models of sustainability, and try to retain much knowledge for rebuilding human society in a more eco-logical fashion. To push for wider understanding of peak oil and energy descent now may not be fruitful, after a certain level of awareness has been reached. The peak oil movement peaked in 2006. Those in the know can't do much more about peak oil, and they do not need to talk to themselves about it year after year. So the entire subject of energy, peak oil and petrocollapse can be compartmentalized in perhaps a Resilience.org category of webpages, for example, for those seeking a concentrated resource of information, philosophy and action regarding energy issues.

Breakthrough concept or event?

At Culture Change we believe that civilization needs to be viewed as a growth machine or pyramid scheme: expansion is essential for maximizing power, profit and surplus, and manipulating people and nature. When stripped of its hype, civilization and society as we know it can be rejected as illegitimate in an overpopulated world. Of course, an alternative must be presented. Fortunately, more and more people embrace system-change, as evidenced by the Occupy movement. "Occupy!" is praised across a wide spectrum, from deeply informed Energy Bulletin editors and writers (e.g., Brent Blackwelder), to Democratic Party functionaries under orders to try to co-opt the Occupy movement to boost election chances in November. From a system-critique stance, one can start to see "the 1%" as benefiting most from endless growth of consumers and workers.

Most likely we have not hit on any breakthrough concept or strategy yet for the population issue. Please feel free to email your thoughts for publication, specifying attribution or none. Please limit it to two paragraphs, and if we like it we'll perhaps ask for elaboration. No sense in stating the obvious regarding the problems or impacts of population. We're already aware of the biologists' point that so many humans and their misbehavior are now causing one of the greatest extinction events of species in the planet's history of life.

There are mild population reduction successes that could be replicated. Italy and Japan come to mind. But these high-density countries' accomplishment of population stabilization possess no nope of sustainability when they are still petroleum dependent. It is important to realize that the superior energy efficiency of Western Europe per capita -- twice that of the U.S. -- is by now a false goal: the global reduction will be much more, and it will be almost entirely involuntary.

With 7 billion people threatening to become 8 billion people, and more, it is time to at least fight for consensus that much more growth is impossible. But even those well versed in overpopulation, trying to focus the world on the problem, may fall into the camp of many more people supposedly being sustainable. What they invariably are not taking into account is energy resource limits. Even if they understand peak oil, they may have the idea that it means we have simply entered the "Second half of the Oil Age," as claimed by geologist Colin Campbell. This is what happens when someone believes the peak oil bell curve can be applied to the whole world's oil demand based on dwindling reserves. However, the extrapolation for a mirror-image of the growth curve falls flat, or rather plummets in an L shaped curve, when a devastating oil supply interruption is factored in. Such an event can suddenly prevent enough people from getting to their jobs or accessing affordable food, so as to bring about rapid economic chaos that brings down even the oil industry infrastructure that individual consumers take for granted.

Without a definitive answer on overpopulation that most people can swallow, we may simply have to be Cassandras or keepers of the ecological truth. This means collapse-analysis perhaps coupled with the hopeful array of escalating Transition trends. But we don't know yet. For it is possible that a climate scare of epic proportions, showing 7 billion people how hundreds of millions can die off easily, can focus people in unexpected and even enlightened ways. Such as, believing "Gaia wants you to share the Earth with her fellow creatures in a fair and respectful fashion, for your own good and cosmic joy." But how many can go for that now? Few. That is why most everyone may be where Julia Butterfly said: When we do not embrace or make change according to our surrounding reality, we are hit upside the head with a 2x4 with "change" written all over it (Auto-Free Times interview, 1998, with Jan Lundberg).

Sometimes, however, we can only wait for change. While population or overpopulation is indeed "the elephant in the room," something unstated is that whatever one is thinking or saying will not budge the elephant. So it does not matter what we say or think about the elephant, if it is indeed already in the room. It goes or stays on its own power, as it wishes, because it is stronger and much bigger than we are. It is in charge. So, to succeed in getting a global discussion going on population or overpopulation may accomplish very little -- even if this elusive goal were to be achieved -- until nature takes charge and culls our excess numbers as if we were just another species.

Meanwhile, we can buck the dominant culture and prepare for a sustainable future by respecting life more than short-term economic gains that are increasingly unlikely for almost everyone.

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Further reading:

Ehrlich, Paul R. (1968). The Population Bomb. Ballantine Books.

Engelman, Robert. More: Population, Nature, and What Women Want, Island Press/Worldwatch Institute, 2008. Order More through Worldwatch Institute. Culture Change's review by John Wertime

Population Press online and in print.

Energybulletin.net

Counterpunch article on co-opting attempt of Occupy movment: Yes, the 99% Spring is a Fraud, by Charles M. Young, April 13-15, 2012