

WORLD•WATCH

VISION FOR A SUSTAINABLE WORLD

Population AND ITS DISCONTENTS

Introduction

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Population and Its Discontents

Editors' Introduction

Population arouses passions. No other topic covered recently in *World Watch* has driven so many people to sit down and dash off a strongly worded letter. At one time this passion was widespread; population seemed a more urgent issue in the 1970s. But it faded from public discourse and the media hardly mention it now. What happened?

The “neo-Malthusian” perspective of the late 1960s and 1970s held that the amount of food-producing land and other resources is fixed but the number of people grows geometrically. It stressed the sheer numbers of people and the huge annual increases, concerns justified by the high fertility rates common in much of the world. Unfortunately, two attention-getting books (*The Population Bomb* and *The Limits to Growth*) were later attacked as false alarms, and the issue was marginalized. But the annual increase is still over 70 million and global population has doubled or even tripled in the lifetimes of many *World Watch* readers.

In the 1980s, experts realized that the problem isn't just gross numbers, it's consumption too: a newborn in the U.S. or Europe will put greater pressure on the Earth's carrying capacity than a whole family of newborns in India. It was also recognized that human fertility is closely tied to the social and economic conditions under which people live. Where women's opportunities for education and employment are limited, population is far harder to stabilize. These and other divisive observations have made population studies one of the most volatile of all subjects.

Most people remain oblivious to the implications of population growth, but a few are trying to awaken political leaders to a range of related concerns: immigration, reproductive rights, public health, the decimation of forests and other resources, the diminishing quality of life, and others. This special issue is our contribution—long overdue, some readers tell us—toward clarifying the present status of human population, the best ways of addressing the inevitable further growth and the need to stabilize it rapidly, and the actions individuals can take to help achieve these goals and minimize their own impacts on the planet.

Even at 60 pages, this issue will be inadequate. Pop-

ulation is such a sprawling and contentious subject that many volumes would be required to do justice to it. We have tried here to offer a sampling of thought-provoking essays on some of the central issues. We begin with an overview by Worldwatch Research Associate Danielle Nierenberg and Senior Fellow Mia MacDonald that describes world population trends and the current consensus on the policies—many of them centered on public health and women's empowerment—necessary to promote declines in fertility rates. Worldwatch Research Associate Lisa Mastny follows with an examination of the youth “bulge” in some developing countries, and agricultural scientist David Pimentel discusses the pressures created by trends in energy, arable land, and farm output. Population theorist Virginia Abernethy then lays out her hypothesis that rising energy prices may help curb further population growth.

Three snapshots of specific areas follow: Claudia Meulenberg looks at China 25 years after that country launched its one-child policy. Dr. Fred Sai, a Ghanaian physician, offers a view from Africa, and Roger-Mark De Souza describes a project relating population and environment in the Philippines. The ways population flows under globalization can link different countries is discussed by economist Herman Daly. Then, a second trio of authors—economist Robert Ayres, demographer Martha Farnsworth Riche, and sociologist Lincoln Day—examine the implications of aging populations (the inexorable result of stabilization). A concluding essay by anthropologist J. Kenneth Smail looks at the long-term need to reduce the human population to a sustainable number.

We'd like to thank our contributing authors, as well as the UN Population Fund and those donors who responded to our special appeal. Their generosity has enabled us to explore a number of the most critical population-related topics in this expanded issue.



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