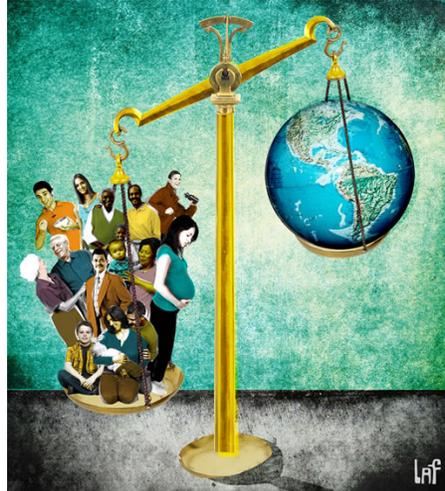


Is Human Population Really the Problem?

Jeff Lindsay

(slightly edited & expanded)



Newspapers have become overpopulated, so to speak, with warnings about human overpopulation. Such warnings have been issued regularly for decades - even centuries - with consistently incorrect predictions. On the first Earth Day, Paul Ehrlich's 1968 bestseller, *The Population Bomb*, was widely quoted. He predicted that by 1985, the "population explosion" would lead to world famine, the death of the oceans, a reduction in life expectancy to 42 years, and the wasting of the Midwest into a vast desert. He was about as accurate as Malthus himself, the Englishman who, in 1798, predicted catastrophic food shortages that never came.

The population doomsayers usually offer the solution of global government - BIG government - to determine, in Gaylord Nelson's words, "the optimum number of people." Ironically, where there is famine, the problem usually is not an excess of people but an excess of government, which leads to gross misallocation and misuse of resources as corrupt bureaucrats or dictators seek power more than the welfare their subjects.

Just what is "overpopulation"? How does one determine when a nation is overpopulated? There are no clear demographic indicators for this fuzzy notion. If population density is used as the criterion, then Bermuda and Monaco would be crisis zones, while Nigeria and Ethiopia should be paradise. Other factors, like population growth rate, also provide metrics riddled with inconsistencies. Yes, there are places where people lack resources and go hungry, but eliminating neighbors is not the solution to the condition of poverty. If we are worried about those who go hungry, let us recognize that the hungry are suffering from poverty, not from overpopulation.

But isn't poverty directly related to population size or to rapid population growth? Absolutely not. The population control crowd is now embarrassed by the light of scientific

study into the relationship between population and economic development. A wide variety of recent economic studies on this issue have shattered the myth that population growth is bad for a nation's economy. Though rarely reported by the media, this has led to a remarkable revolution in the scientific (not the political) community. This scientific revolution is documented by Dr. Julian Simon, Univ. of Maryland, in Jay Lehr's book *Rational Readings on Environmental Concerns*, Van Nostrand Reinhold Publ., 1992. Now the real scientific debate centers on whether population growth has a neutral or positive effect, but there clearly is no significant negative effect.

Fascinating case studies can be found in pairs of similar nations having centrally-planned and market economies, such as China and Taiwan or the former East and West Germany. Though the centrally-planned nations began with similar resources and similar birth rates, and even lower population densities, than their market-based counterparts, the market economies prospered, in spite of the higher "population pressure." Even with high population density, enterprise-based economies flourish while centrally-planned nations stagnate and become addicted to foreign aid. The real problem is not excess people, but excess government.

How can the "obvious" logic of the population control lobby be wrong? Because the resources of the planet are not a fixed pie that dwindle with each birth. The resources are whatever we can make of this planet - or solar system - and it takes the work of human beings to transform raw materials and energy into useful resources. Humans are not a liability, but a resource that we need! On this topic, I recommend the work of Drs. C. Maurice and C. Smithson of Texas A&M, *The Doomsday Myth*, Hoover Institute Press, Stanford Univ., 1984. (This gem will help you have a lot more fun and success in debates with the doomsaying crowd.)

Our technological society, fueled by the precious resource of abundant working, thinking human beings, has enabled crop lands to skyrocket in productivity and has enabled humans to live vastly longer than ever before. The resulting large population, living at a higher standard than ever before, breathing cleaner air and drinking purer water, is a cause for celebration, not for doomsaying. Once-neglected resources - solar energy, sand, radioactive minerals, salt water, carbon dioxide, the vast interior mantle of the earth itself - may provide the foundations for future economies beyond anything we have today. The future could be bright, unless we surrender what's left of our free economy for a global, centrally-planned economy in which political elitists rule and decide how many of us must live to achieve "the optimum number of human beings."

Population density: comparisons

The following table compares population density with life expectancy and income for a variety of countries. An examination of the facts may challenge commonly repeated assumptions about the need to reduce population size. The data below are extracted from a table by Gale Lyle Pooley, *Environmentalism and the Gospel*, Analytica, Sun Valley, Idaho, 1995, p. 92 (note: Pooley's excellent and heavily documented book was written for an LDS

audience). Pooley's sources were the 1992 World Population Data Sheet from the Population Reference Bureau, Inc., Washington, D.C., and the 1993 World Almanac, U.S. Census Bureau, Bureau of Economic Analysis. You can obtain similar data yourself using The CIA World Factbook.

Statistics on Population and Prosperity: Is There an Effect?				
Country	Population per square mile	Pop. per sq. mile arable land	Income per capita	Life exp.
Bangladesh	2,004	2,990	\$180	56.2
China	315	3,146	\$370	69.8
Denmark	313	513	\$15,200	74.5
Germany	585	1,950	\$19,943	74.6
India	695	1,264	\$300	52.3
Israel	648	3,814	\$10,500	75.6
Japan	865	6,657	\$27,321	79.1
Mexico	115	960	\$2,936	64.2
New Jersey*	1,046	5,505	\$25,372	77.9
Switzerland	433	4,329	\$18,700	77.3
Taiwan	1,669	6,956	\$8,083	70.2
United Kingdom	611	2,108	\$15,000	75.5
United States	71	354	\$22,212	74.9

*New Jersey is a part of the United States and not a separate country. It is given for comparison.

The high population density of China pales in comparison with that of prosperous Taiwan or rich and clean Switzerland. New Jersey also has a much higher population density than China, but only the most hardened would advocate forced sterilizations and forced abortions to save New Jersey from collapse. Having been in Switzerland, New Jersey, and China, I can say that the quality of life (environmental quality, income, life expectancy, and health care) is vastly superior in the first two, where the population density is higher. What's the difference? The political and economic systems must be taken into account. If a system hinders rather than rewards human productivity and impedes efficient utilization of resources through central planning, then the problem may not be due to numbers of people.

But could it be that we are running out of space? Walk through New York, Calcutta, or Hong Kong and experience the incredible crowding: surely there just isn't room for all these people. Yes, there are crowded places in the world. There are strong economic and social incentives for people to cluster together. If Manhattan were spread out over the state of Montana, it's economic power would be greatly diminished (and a lot of moose

would be mugged). Yet leave these population centers, and we find a remarkably unpopulated planet.

How much land does it take to hold 6 billion people? To give you an idea, consider the small nation of Japan. It has about 143,000 square miles of area. One square mile has 5280 x 5280 square feet = 27.9 million square feet. Japan has a total of about 4 trillion square feet, enough to give each person of the earth 670 square feet. If we housed people in families of four in simple two-level buildings (8 people per building, one family of four per level), each building could be on a lot of over 5300 square feet. (Of course, I've ignored that fact that many parts of Japan would be unsuitable for dwelling places, and I've neglected the land needed for roads, parks, schools, etc.) In a land area as small as Japan, the entire population of the earth could be housed on lots of 5300 square feet, with 8 people per lot. That's smaller than the typical American lot of about 8000 square feet, but it's not unbearably small. If we insisted on American standards, with only 4 people per lot of at least 8,000 square feet, then Gale Lyle Pooley shows that an area the size of Texas plus Nevada would be adequate (op. cit., p. 93). That would make those two states less attractive, perhaps, but it would leave the rest of the world for food production, animal reserves, nature movies, Woodstock festivals, or whatever. In terms of the real resources of this planet, we are not overpopulated.

Declining Fertility Rates

A remarkable phenomenon has been observed in the past two centuries: a sustained decline in fertility, yielding long-term reductions in family size in many countries, particularly in Europe. But in the past few decades the trend has also been seen on other countries like Japan, Cyprus, Puerto Rico and Costa Rica (Nicholas Eberstadt, "Population, Food, and Income: Global Trends in the Twentieth Century," in *The True State of the Planet*, ed. Ronald Bailey, New York: The Free Press, 1995, pp. 7-47, esp. pp. 15-16). Total fertility rate (TFR), the average number of births per woman during childbearing years, has been tracked by the United Nations and shows a consistent decline in the past few decades for both developed and less developed countries. Around 1950 TFR was around 5, but by 1995 dropped to about 3 – a 40% decline (Eberstadt, pp. 18-19). Some countries have TFR rates below the replacement level of 2.1, so that the population of those countries is currently shrinking (this is true of *sixty-one countries* according to the article "Total Fertility Rates" at Overpopulation.com). In fact, officials at the Population Division of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs in the United Nations have expressed concern over the implications of the low fertility rates, as discussed by Austin Russe in the online article, "United Nations Warns About Declining Population." (UN report: www.un.org/esa/population/publications/migration/migration.htm)

Sub-Saharan Africa, unlike most of the rest of the world, has not yet shown the dramatic decline in fertility. Nicholas Eberstadt, a respected demographer and a Visiting Fellow at Harvard's Center for Population Studies, discusses and documents these trends (ibid.), and notes that it is impossible to predict when or if Africa will show a similar drop in TFR, as it was impossible to predict that other countries would show that trend. Who would have

guessed that over a 25-year period, the TFR for Thailand would drop by more than 50%, for Colombia would drop by 60% and for Hong Kong by 75%? But the continued decline in TFR, probably associated with changes in attitudes about families, contraception, and economic factors, challenges the position of overpopulation alarmists, who rely on simple extrapolations based on the assumption that current growth rates and current resources won't change. This kind of thinking has led Malthus, Paul Ehrlich, and many others to make failed predictions of massive catastrophes that seem silly in retrospect.

United Nations projections and those of the US Census Bureau suggest that the TFR across the world can be expected to continue declining. Some details are provided at www.overpopulation.com/faq/basic_information/total_fertility_rate/.

Clearly, human population has been increasing in recent years. How can this be if fertility has declined so dramatically? The obvious but often ignored answer is that current population growth is largely due to the increase in human longevity. As Eberstadt explains (*ibid.*, p. 21):

At the start of our century, a rough guess would place global life expectancy at birth at about 30 years. By the early 1990s, global life expectancy is thought to have risen to about 64 years, more than doubling over these nine decades. Since it is further believed that life expectancy in earlier times could not have been much lower than 20 over any long period without raising the prospect of extinction, it would seem that over three-fourths of the total improvement in human longevity since the origin of our species has been achieved since 1900. This worldwide health explosion explains the global "population explosion." Rapid population growth commenced not because human beings suddenly started breeding like rabbits but rather because they finally stopped dying like flies.

Contributing to the longevity of humans has been the increasingly abundant food resources over the past century. Eberstadt reports that in the postwar era, the real price of food grains has been gradually and significantly declining (*ibid.*, p. 28). A World Bank study published in 1988 showed that the real price of food grains dropped by over 40% in the twentieth century (Enzo R. Grilli and Maw Chen Yang, "Primary Commodity Prices, Manufactured Goods Prices, and Terms of Trade: What the Long Run Shows," *World Bank Economic Review*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1988), pp. 1-47, as cited by Eberstadt, *ibid.*, p. 28), and prices have continued to drop since that study. If there were too many mouths to feed, the price of food would be increasing, but in spite of the global population tripling in the past century, food has become less scarce.

There has been famine, but it is typically associated with repressive governments, not a scarcity of resources. Eberstadt (p. 40) gives key examples:

The Soviet famine of 1934, for example, was the consequence of the official collectivization campaign in the Ukraine. Stalin specifically intended to use

starvation as a weapon to break Ukrainian resistance to his policies, which is why the historian Robert Conquest has termed the hunger a "terror-famine." The Bengal famine of 1943 took place at a time when local harvests were quite good but when British officials, fearing a possible Japanese invasion from neighboring Burma, had systematically removed local grain supplies. The Chinese famine followed immediately upon Mao's Great Leap Forward, a collectivization campaign that inadvertently shattered the agricultural system in a low-income population. Mass starvation erupted in Ethiopia in the 1980s after its communist government inflicted a series of harsh and injurious policies on a population whose living standard was typically only slightly above the subsistence level.

In each of these instances, the reckless or intentionally punitive policies embraced by presiding government would have been expected to result in massive loss of life, no matter what the local fertility level or population growth rate.

Were it not for excesses of corrupt and excessive governments and the wars and afflictions they bring, the populations of the world would have much cause to rejoice. Humans are living longer. Disease is being eradicated. Food is cheaper and more available than ever. This is wonderful news, but for doomsayers, it's bad news when humans live longer, better lives. The doomsayers want us to panic and put them in charge of a new world, so they can rebuild the world in their image, running our lives and grudgingly passing out resources that, under their guidance, would surely become increasingly scarce. It's time to reject their agenda and move forward with sanity, not fear.

Population vs. Food Supplies

What most textbooks on world population do not reveal is the fact that the population growth rate has been declining significantly since the 1960s, falling from 2% per year then to about 1.7% today, with a projected rate of less than 1% by 2030. Many demographers think that the rapid population growth of this century was an unusual occurrence due to dramatic decline in death rates. Death rates dropped because of health care (including antibiotics, vaccination, and new drugs), sanitation, wonderful gains in nutrition and agriculture, better child care, and more available technology. (I'm amazed to see that some people, instead of rejoicing in the miracles that have provided longer life and a higher quality of life for many people, bemoan the advances and call for totalitarian population controls and harsher, less abundant lifestyles – for everyone else but them, that is.)

Malthus' predictions continue to fail. They failed to consider the importance of human work and ingenuity in providing increased resources to support human life at much higher population levels. In spite of the grossly failed predictions of Paul Ehrlich and other doomsayers, the world has increasing supplies of food, with global production of both wheat and rice increasing faster than population growth (a 2% growth rate for wheat and a 3.5% rate for rice, compared to a 1.7% growth rate for population). Further, the world

currently has abundant idle cropland that could be used to support large numbers of people (e.g., 60 million acres of idle cropland in the U.S.).

What Happened to Catastrophic Predictions Made By Noted Environmentalists?

During the 1960s and early 1970s a cottage industry emerged for books predicting a global catastrophe caused by population growth (more than one observer has noted the real overpopulation problem seemed to be in the yearly growth of these books full of their doom and gloom scenarios).

From our view in the mid-1990s, these authors were not simply wrong, but they grossly underestimated the course of human progress over the last quarter century. Their best case scenarios didn't even come close to both the economic growth and the inroads made against hunger, pollution and other problems that face the world. It often seemed the psychics hired by the National Enquirer were more accurate than those who have made a profession over the last three decades of constantly predicting disaster due to overpopulation.

Yet many of these failed prophets, such as Paul Ehrlich and Lester Brown, continue to publish books containing predictions of global disaster. It was more than a little ironic that Ehrlich was able to publish books in the 1990s predicting global disaster, since according to his previous predictions, up to a billion people were supposed to die in the 1970s and 1980s leading to the collapse of industrial society.

2005 Update: A fascinating new article by a prominent environmentalist points out what should be obvious: the overpopulation scare was just a scare, and now it's time to move on. I refer to "Environmental Heresies" by Stewart Brand, the founder of *The Farmers Almanac*, printed in *MIT Technology Review*, May 2005. He makes the following points:

For 50 years, the demographers in charge of human population projections for the United Nations released hard numbers that substantiated environmentalists' greatest fears about indefinite exponential population increase. For a while, those projections proved fairly accurate. However, in the 1990s, the U.N. started taking a closer look at fertility patterns, and in 2002, it adopted a new theory that shocked many demographers: human population is leveling off rapidly, even precipitously, in developed countries, with the rest of the world soon to follow. Most environmentalists still haven't got the word. Worldwide, birthrates are in free fall. Around one-third of countries now have birthrates below replacement level (2.1 children per woman) and sinking. Nowhere does the downward trend show signs of leveling off. Nations already in a birth dearth crisis include Japan, Italy, Spain, Germany, and Russia--whose population is now in absolute decline and is expected to be 30 percent lower by 2050. On every part of every continent and in every culture (even Mormon), birthrates are headed down. They reach replacement level and keep on dropping. It turns out that population decrease

accelerates downward just as fiercely as population increase accelerated upward, for the same reason. Any variation from the 2.1 rate compounds over time.

That's great news for environmentalists (or it will be when finally noticed), but they need to recognize what caused the turnaround. The world population growth rate actually peaked at 2 percent way back in 1968, the very year my old teacher Paul Ehrlich published *The Population Bomb*.^{*} The world's women didn't suddenly have fewer kids because of his book, though. They had fewer kids because they moved to town.

Cities are population sinks--always have been. Although more children are an asset in the countryside, they're a liability in the city. A global tipping point in urbanization is what stopped the population explosion. As of this year, 50 percent of the world's population lives in cities, with 61 percent expected by 2030. In 1800 it was 3 percent; in 1900 it was 14 percent.

The environmentalist aesthetic is to love villages and despise cities. My mind got changed on the subject a few years ago by an Indian acquaintance who told me that in Indian villages the women obeyed their husbands and family elders, pounded grain, and sang. But, the acquaintance explained, when Indian women immigrated to cities, they got jobs, started businesses, and demanded their children be educated. They became more independent, as they became less fundamentalist in their religious beliefs. Urbanization is the most massive and sudden shift of humanity in its history. Environmentalists will be rewarded if they welcome it and get out in front of it. In every single region in the world, including the U.S., small towns and rural areas are emptying out. The trees and wildlife are returning. Now is the time to put in place permanent protection for those rural environments. Meanwhile, the global population of illegal urban squatters--which Robert Neuwirth's book *Shadow Cities* already estimates at a billion--is growing fast. Environmentalists could help ensure that the new dominant human habitat is humane and has a reduced footprint of overall environmental impact.

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^{*} Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* also came out the same year as Pope Paul VI's encyclical *Humanae Vitae* about the immorality of artificial contraception. Ehrlich's book received wide publicity and the ideas it popularized were constantly used as a bludgeon against this Catholic teaching [Endnote not from the above authors].