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Can Europe save the Earth?

POPULATION AND THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS

John is a former psychologist who became an environmental writer on seeing that few environmentalists were speaking up about the problems of population and corporate economic growth. His passionate activism is driven by the belief that population is arguably the most important environmental topic today, and yet receives close to the least coverage.

No one wants to talk about it, but the size and growth of the human population is central to the climate crisis.

It's a simple equation: our total consumption of greenhouse-gas-emitting fossil fuels is the product of two factors: population size and average per capita fossil fuel consumption. The latter factor gets all the press. China's rigid one-child policy and political pressures from activist groups who see the issue as a distraction from their own causes have made discussion of population taboo.

Ultimately, the subject will not be denied. When we consider the larger ecological crisis of which climate change is a part, it becomes clear that we cannot expect to solve our environmental problems without tackling both factors in the equation.

Living above the planet's means

From a human-caused sixth mass extinction (the fifth having wiped out the dinosaurs) to groundwater and oil depletion, the evidence speaks. Living as we do, we have outgrown the earth. Our numbers have exceeded the biosphere's resource-generating and waste-absorbing capacities, putting us into what ecologists and environmental scientists call "overshoot" of the earth's "carrying capacity" for humans. According to the Ecological Footprint data at

the Global Footprint Network we entered into overshoot in the 1980s. We now use the regenerative and absorptive capacities of 1.25 Earths - clearly an unsustainable situation. The Ecological Footprint authors emphasise, moreover, that their methods are conservative; the reality is worse than the data suggest.

A lesser known fact emerging from the Footprint data is that we cannot realistically expect to return to sustainability merely by reducing per capita resource consumption. To converge at a consumption level low enough to ease us out of overshoot would require all developed nations to drop voluntarily to the level of Nigeria or Guatemala - an unlikely scenario, and even then not low enough given the data's conservative nature.

Yet the study of other species tells us overshoot can only be temporary. Ultimately, we will return to living within Earth's limits, whether by purposeful, humane actions or at the hand of nature. The latter's methods, effective but dispassionate, include such corrective measures as famine and disease.

Shaking off the population taboo

Fortunately, our own more compassionate approaches cost little. Better health care, women's education, and family planning services - the centerpieces of any program to reduce population growth -- come in at a fraction of the cost of technological solutions such as nuclear power plants and the development and construction of renewable energy facilities.

But the world needs a nudge to shake off the population taboo. And a

glance at fertility rates tells us the EU is poised to set an example for other developed countries, and ultimately the rest of the world, to follow.

A country's "total fertility rate" refers to the number of children born, on average, to a woman in that country. A rate of 2.1 leads in time to a stable population size. At lower rates, barring immigration levels high enough to compensate, a country's population will eventually shrink - however, it should be noted that there is considerable lag time between the drop below 2.1 and the actual shrinkage.

Low fertility rates: a blessing in disguise?

All EU countries now have fertility rates below 2.1. Belgium and Germany, for instance, are now at about 1.6 and 1.4 respectively. Though some countries such as France and Norway are close to 2.0, others including Italy, Spain, and Poland are under 1.3.

Those fertility rates may be the best news in the world today. They mean the EU could be among the first areas of the world to return to living within the earth's limits. But you would not know it from listening to economists. They hear about low fertility rates and complain of economic challenges ahead as the younger, working age population declines.

They would probably stop complaining if they took a class in environmental science. They would learn that our overshoot of the earth's limits threatens hundreds of millions and possibly more human lives as problems such as climate change, mass extinction, and oil depletion converge. We are already on track to extinguish half of all species by the end of the century. The

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economic implications of a shrinking population are a mere inconvenience compared to the ecological impacts of a population continuing to grow under these conditions.

Lower growth to avoid catastrophe

The complaining economists should consider that no economy can exist without an intact biosphere. Maybe then they would more easily listen to natural scientists who call for worldwide population stabilisation and even reduction to ensure the survival of millions of species including our own.

Unfortunately, some EU leaders are paying more attention to the economists. Some governments have enacted policies designed specifically to boost fertility rates. France, Poland, and Italy, for instance, have all instituted monetary incentives encouraging larger families. At a global level, such policies can ultimately be seen as suicidal. By encouraging population growth they push us closer to a global ecological collapse threatening all life.

We humans are an inventive species. Surely we can learn to maintain a good quality of life, avoiding economic hardship in the context of declining populations. But we cannot undo extinctions, provide sufficient water when aquifers have run dry, or easily turn back climate change as it passes certain thresholds. Instead of listening to complaints about short-term

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economic worries, EU citizens should welcome the prospect of population decline and embrace the challenge of learning to live well, but within natural limits. Now is the time to show the rest of the world the path to sustainability. ...



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