

# THE POPULATION DEBATE

by Margit Alm

When the leaders of the world gathered in Copenhagen in December 2009, enjoying the hospitality of the Danes and not achieving anything, the 'population' word was on no one's lips. Not that representatives from population sustainability groups were not present – no, they were just sidelined.



'Population' is the big elephant in the room no one wants to see, the hush-hush word that must not be murmured. Why are people so anthropocentric in their thinking, so absorbed in their own unimportance, so obsessed with population growth and unwilling to accept that there are just too many of us for our own good?

The simple answer is that it is in our nature to put us ahead of all other creatures, even though the planet does not concur. If humans would suddenly vanish from Earth, remaining life on the planet would thrive.

For the moment the great debate is about anthropogenic climate change and how to prevent the planet from overheating. If by any miracle scientists would succeed in that mission overnight, our environmental woes would still be there. We would still be facing water shortages, land degradation, deforestation, desert encroachment, species and biodiversity loss, disease, famine, conflict – to name but a few ills. The cause for all these sicknesses is human overpopulation.

Indeed, overpopulation is directly responsible for CO<sub>2</sub> emissions. In "Heaven and Earth" climate change skeptic Ian Plimer opines that exhalations from mammals contribute almost 39% to all CO<sub>2</sub> emissions.

Scientists scramble to find a cure for the diseases in form of technological solutions, but each of these solutions creates its own problems if only because we do not fully understand Nature's workings – yet; and just like economists love to op-

erate in a an economic partial equilibrium, so scientists fail to take a holistic approach to their environmental interference.

There is only one true answer, and it is one that humans are fully capable of managing: reduce the global population to a level that the planet can sustain without becoming stressed.

That raises the question: how many of us will Earth tolerate? Opinions vary widely.

There is the economist Julian Simon who believes in perpetual population growth for the next 7 billion years (obviously well passed the planet's use-by-date!). Jared Diamond, author of "Collapse" had fun with statistics and demonstrated that Julian's scenario would have to squeeze in 10 people to the square metre in 774 years; in 2000 years the mass of people would equal the mass of the planet, and in 6000 years people weight would equal universe weight. Of course, long long before that Earth would tell its most contentious species where it could go.

Global population estimates now range from anywhere from 9 billion to 12 billion by mid century. Economist Jeffrey Sachs in "Common Wealth" argues with the help of detailed calculations that some population growth is already in the pipeline and will take place despite all efforts to stem it through family planning. He advocates a figure of not more than 8 billion and declining.

On the other side of the spectrum are such environmental scientists as James Lovelock, Tim Flannery, Hans-Joachim Schellnhuber (and most likely many more) who envisage a global population of one billion or less. That does not sound a bad number at all. When the global population was barely nudging one billion some 200 years ago mankind, during the Age of Enlightenment, experienced a cultural and intellectual blossoming that remains unsurpassed.

The bottom line is that growth cannot continue in perpetuity. We have the choice of either carefully managing it and creating an environment where all creatures can enjoy comfort and space on the planet, or we ignore the warnings and ultimately feel Nature's furore.

Why not choose the lesser evil?

Humans and planet are in balance when the renewable resources are exploited at a rate below their regeneration. That is not the case today. A few years ago a CSIRO report stated that humans are exceeding this rate by 25%. In other words: humans are consuming a considerable amount of the planet's capital. To reverse that we could all tighten our belts and consume less. Certainly we could dispense with the an-

nual approximate one billion dollar worth of Christmas presents in Australia alone that no one wants, and put the money to better use. But too much belt-tightening would be resented by the people, especially by BRIC and developing countries who all aspire to First World living standards. Therefore, population control is the preferred option in conjunction with some consumer restraint.

Nor should we think that Australia is immune from population control. Just like global carrying capacity is Australia's carrying capacity difficult to calculate and subject to variation. First Australians did not exceed one million, and they knew what they were doing. Perhaps we can learn from them. Some estimates from scientists today put the cap at 10 million or less.

In the short term we will have to accept some further growth, to perhaps 25 or 26 million and then declining. But quite clearly, the latest estimate of 35 million is unsustainable.

Australia is a desert country with only small patches of fertile soil, representing perhaps 5-6% of total surface area. Australia's greatest treasures are the remnants of pristine wilderness locations. They are now under threat from corporate greed; from the Kimberleys to Old Growth Forests in



Tasmania and Victoria to farmland in NSW the corporate push is for resource exploitation. One property billionaire in Sydney even wants to strip all coastal national parks of their status to build residences with ocean views.

I have set my own guidelines for population numbers: There must not be more humans than (a) there are freshwater sources to satisfy human needs and (b) humans can rely on organically grown food. In other words: hands-off such extremes as treated saltwater (desalinated water) and genetically modified food and their lesser equivalents.

Natural population growth is by and large under control in developed countries, and population increase through immigration can be reversed instantly, as it is a government policy decision.

It is in the developing countries where much work needs to be done. Populations will naturally decline when people have sufficient access to food, shelter, health, education, safety in their daily lives and security in old age, and – when women become emancipated and will take control of the reproductive cycle. In other words: social justice for all.

And how can Henry George assist in all this? I believe Henry George would have supported population control. He was a commonsense man and a strong advocate of social justice. And he had an answer: using the principle of resources rent to create social justice (which will aid population management).

**“Populations will naturally decline when people have sufficient access to food, shelter, health, education, safety in their daily lives and security in old age.”**

The current proposal of an ETS (emissions trading scheme) is not likely to succeed, however, it will fill handsomely the pockets of the “people in-between” (the brokers). A direct charge is the better answer. Charging individuals and businesses for the use and abuse of natural resources will ensure that today's exploitative mega rich will have to make their just and fair contribution to the common good – all in the interest of saving humankind from self-destruction.

### **Populationists the pawns of the pyramid purveyors?**

Strong words yes, but high birth rates have always been used as a means for the wealthy to blame the poor for their own plight. ‘You have too many kids. You don't wash your hands. It's your fault you're poor.’

This in turn deters poor, insecure and over-worked people from analysing the cause itself – the economic system. A tax system that penalises people for working but yet rewards those for speculating on the value of natural resources is what should be in focus. People need to look beyond banks and beyond capitalists or unions to recognise that the most valuable thing we have is the planet itself.

Unfortunately neo-classical and now neo-liberal economics does all it possibly can to ignore the value of the planet. Diverting attention away from economic policy and blaming poor people for their own plight has been an effective diversionary tactic for too long.

The scarcity of natural resources means that land, gold, water or the electromagnetic spectrum are always going to increase in value. Economists call this scarcity rent or economic rent. This privatisation of what should be the birthright of all is the greatest injustice on this planet.

We need to switch taxes off wages and place them on resources so they are used sparingly, rather than hoarded for massive profits. We have 125 taxes in Australia. A Resource Rentals system scales taxes and compliance back. Would you like to pay (at most) half your present income tax? Would you like your tax mix to include an environmental reminder every time you pulled out your wallet?

<http://www.earthsharing.org.au/2009/04/28/populationist-pressures-unravelling/>

**By Karl Fitzgerald**