Talking Humanely about Population

“...You could read a score of reports by bodies concerned with global problems – and see that population is clearly one of the drivers that underlies all of them - and yet find no reference to this obvious fact in any of them. ... Break the taboo, in private and in public.... Wherever and whenever we speak of the environment - add a few words to ensure that the population element is not ignored.”

David Attenborough

While the global population growth rate fell from 2% in 1970 to 1.1% in 2019, population meanwhile more than doubled from 3.5 billion to 7.8 billion. Global population increase, now larger than in 1970, continues at over 80 million per year, headed for 10 billion by mid-century. Growth in human numbers and our ecological impact is still the elephant in the room, the issue that won’t go away without human choices and policies to cut birthrates.

Population is not the only issue of concern and interacts with others such as consumption, environmental protection and injustice. But population is fundamental, a multiplier of consumption. Attenborough concluded his talk cited above by saying that continued growth in human numbers makes other problems “more difficult and ultimately impossible to solve.”

During the 20th century, some countries’ fertility rates fell to below 1.5 (they got rich), while others remained above 6 (they stayed poor). In 2020, about 30 countries are losing population, about 90 have below replacement fertility rates. But over half of all humans still live in countries with above replacement fertility and hence continue exponential population growth. (Table 1)

“Population momentum” means growth continues for half a century even after birth rates fall. China, for example, fell well below replacement fertility (less than 2.1 children/woman) by the early 1980s, with population around 1 billion, but will not peak until 2030 at over 1.4 billion. It takes a long time to stop the Titanic, even with the engines reversed.

Table 1 The half-completed world fertility transition of 2020

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https://populationmatters.org/sites/default/files/Sir%20David%20Attenborough%20RSA%20speech%202011.pdf

2 The statistics reported here are “total fertility rate” (TFR) a cross sectional statistic calculated by adding births across all fertile cohorts from age of puberty to age of menopause. “Completed cohort fertility” would require waiting until women reached the end of childbearing, so TFR is a better snapshot of fertility at a point in time.
From about 1965-1975, limiting growth of human population was accepted as essential across the political spectrum. Governments, foundations and individuals supported family planning initiatives. During the decade of the 1970s, global average birth rates dropped from 5 to 4 per woman. But then a backlash attacked the women’s movement, environmentalists and family planning. The 1994 Cairo UN conference on Population and Development abandoned family planning as an explicit goal. Neither the UN’s Millennium Development Goals nor subsequent Sustainable Development Goals mention population.

During the most recent decade, world average fertility rates only fell by about a tenth of a child/woman, with 44% of the world’s more than 200 million pregnancies per year unintended. Even talking about population seems toxic or taboo to many people and organizations.


The libertarian ideology of the Koch political organization and the Murdoch and Sinclair media empires shifted Americans from their New Deal era support for successful public programs including support for contraception. For people like Donald Trump, abandoning their former support for Planned Parenthood

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fertility rate (1)</th>
<th>Number of countries (2)</th>
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<tr>
<td>&lt;1.5</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt;2.1</td>
<td>91</td>
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<tr>
<td>&gt;2.1</td>
<td>102</td>
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<td>&gt;4</td>
<td>40</td>
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(1) Total fertility rate 2017
(2) Total of 193 countries with data
Global average | 2.43
Lowest | South Korea | 1.05
Highest | Niger | 7.00
Source: World Bank

5 Eric Kaufman in Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth (Profile Books, London, 2010) presents data showing that in all religions (Muslim, Christian, Hindu, Judaism, etc.) fundamentalists tend to have higher fertility rates than more secular believers and atheists.”
6 Most of what Americans know these days we were taught by expensive and expert propaganda. Books like Merchants of Doubt, Dark Money, Democracy in Chains and Shadow Network document the rise of organized efforts to deny science and win political power by use of propaganda techniques and the influence of money.
and legal abortion was a cynical way to win votes and advance an agenda of corporate deregulation and
tax cuts for the wealthy.

Growth is good, so ending population growth must be bad according to the dominant ideology and
incessant pro-growth, pro-consumption advertising messages. In market economies, firms prosper by
finding more customers. They forget that more people also means more competitors, more intense
competition and rising prices for inputs like land, energy and other scarce commodities.

The most effective “single issue” for the American oligarchy’s political agenda has been abortion. After
Roe v Wade, organizers realized that they could win elections by repositioning abortion from “a
procedure to give women their lives back when an unintended pregnancy happens and to prevent
children from being raised in difficult circumstances” to “murder of an innocent potential human.” The
power of this false message to inspire voter turnout paid off in trillion- dollar tax cuts under Reagan,
G.W. Bush and Trump. And success for energy industry climate deniers. Falsehoods about abortion have
been the key lever to gain power for an anti-science agenda. To pay off single-issue anti-abortion voters,
these three presidents all cut family planning funding and sex education, even though education and
contraceptives reduce abortion rates.

If we are going to talk about population again, how can we do it better this time? How can we deal with
the backlash against legal abortion, women’s empowerment and thinking about the future? How can we
unite divergent worldviews into a commonsense consensus on family planning?

Talking about population often doesn’t sound humane. There is no “right to life.” There is life if
conditions exist where life can survive. Human history and pre-history recounts tales of famines,
plagues, wars, torture, genocide, oppression and injustice. We do not live in the Garden of Eden. With
too many people and unsustainable practices, populations collapse. At least 25 past societies grew for
hundreds or thousands of years, then collapsed. Scientists and a Swedish teenager are warning that
current unsustainable trends project to a global collapse.

Darwin observed that life could not survive without evolving and could not evolve unless every species
can produce more offspring than the environment can support. Individual variations allow survivors to
be different from preceding generations and better adapted to new conditions. Natural selection keeps
life viable as conditions change. It would be nice if all possible potential babies could survive, but that is
not the world we live in. As the world gets more crowded beyond some sustainable optimum—which
Paul Ehrlich estimated to be about 1 or 2 billion worldwide—then crowding, hunger, violence and
cruelty increase while quality of life falls.

I witnessed extreme poverty and heartbreak associated with high birth rates in Brazil, Guatemala and
the U.S. South. Infants with kwashiorkor, the horrible swollen belly protein deficiency syndrome.
Margarida, one of her father’s 27 children, was raped and impregnated by an older neighbor at age 14.
Her baby died of malnutrition and poor medical care. It’s hard to make such suffering into a feel-good
story.

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7 Jared Diamond’s *Collapse* (Viking, 2004) and Joseph Tainter’s *Collapse of Complex Societies* (Cambridge University
Press, 1988) describe over two dozen collapses from the ancient Middle East to Easter Island.
8 There have been numerous “scientists’ warnings” by thousands of scientists, https://www.scientistswarning.org/.
Greta Thunberg has become a global voice for future generations threatened by climate change.
But we should instead emphasize good outcomes—ending hunger, prosperity, peace, women and children’s lives enriched—that have shown up where birth rates fell. We should talk more about low birth rates in Norway or Finland or Singapore where liberated women live long, prosperous peaceful lives and children thrive. With birth control and solar panels we have all the technology needed for a Green Utopia on a recovering planet. The future can, realistically, be good or bad. Our collective choice. Optimism is as reasonable as pessimism in the long run, if we can learn to live within our means by stopping growth.

Each country, culture and religion must find its own path to stable population. But it is a global problem. Population growth in poor, high fertility countries spills over into rich countries through mass immigration. Walls to keep misery out will eventually fail unless birth rates fall in countries that are sources of migrants. Rich countries that don’t want to accept more migrants should give family planning aid to poor countries to help keep their numbers in balance with local resources.

Talking humanely about population starts with some notion of how many total numbers of people are too many for ecosystems to support sustainably. We can debate optimum population levels and collectively choose to reduce population by lowering fertility or suffer the far more painful alternative of increasing mortality. Awareness of overpopulation’s negative ecological and human impacts at the national and global levels needs to become part of all cultures. Growth is not always good.

Talking humanely about designing wise policies to reduce overpopulation and restore ecosystems requires the following principles:

1. Everyone has equal fundamental rights to reproduce. Policies designed to limit or increase total numbers of humans must apply equally to everyone.\(^9\)
2. Genetic and cultural diversity are beneficial and enrich life so we should not only tolerate, but value other races, religions and ethnicities.
3. Reproductive decisions depend on many institutions such as cultural norms, education, economic incentives, public policies, etc. Changing institutional “rules of the game” and persuasion can reduce (or increase) birth rates, while respecting human rights.
4. At present there is more coercion, especially from husbands, families and social norms, pushing women to have children they don’t want than coercion to prevent them from having children. With the world in overshoot headed for collapse, women should be educated, enabled and encouraged to choose fewer children.
5. Failures of contraceptives or failure to use contraceptives are the main sources of unwanted pregnancies and therefore the basic cause of abortions.
6. Enhancement of freedom and opportunity for women and their children should guide policy. Empowerment of women and access to modern contraceptives reduce fertility rates.
7. There is a valid community role in encouraging or discouraging childbearing because the collective outcomes of other people’s childbearing decisions affect our children’s life chances.
8. Since all contraceptive methods have failure rates, and nearly half of all pregnancies are unintended, voluntary termination of pregnancies plays a key role in improving women and children’s lives. Equating abortion with murder is a falsehood.

\(^9\) Where death rates differ or some groups are very few, fairness becomes more complicated. China’s One-Child policy allowed minorities to have up to three children. Real life is complicated, but the basic principle of equality matters where fundamental human rights are concerned.
9. Overpopulation and divergent fertility rates are global problems. So long as anyplace continues exponential growth, eventually there will be too many people for the earth to support and conflict over scarce territory and resources.

Life does not begin at conception, but rather life began four billion years ago when DNA replicated. Survival of all possible conceptions is biologically impossible. Survival requires conditions that sustain life. The world will be a kinder better place with family planning and abortion than without them. Let’s think about the future, talk kindly and listen to each other.

10 A woman is born with a million potential egg cells, with timeouts for pregnancies, she sheds one egg via ovulation each month for about 30 years, 350-400 total. Each ejaculation contains tens of millions of sperm. Half of fertilized eggs (conceptions) fail to implant and are lost. Of pregnancies that do begin, 20% are lost to miscarriage. Of unintended pregnancies, additional millions are lost due to voluntary termination (abortion). In the highest fertility countries, over fifty out of one thousand live births die before age one. Before modern medicine, a third to half of all babies born died by age five and mortality continued high throughout life. We are all, sadly, born to die. There are more “unborn potential humans” than could possibly survive. If you are a believer, this is God’s plan. If you accept Darwin, it is how life came to thrive on earth. A good plan, but one where all possible individuals cannot survive.