

## The Argument for Population Control

In 1793 Thomas Malthus first argued that because population grows exponentially, it will eventually overwhelm efforts to reduce per capita environmental impact.<sup>i</sup> Malthusians have made notorious predictions of environmental disaster that have proven grossly inaccurate, and they are controversial for that reason. The inaccuracy of specific predictions notwithstanding, it requires little thought to see the inherent logic of the Malthusian argument. Exponential growth cannot occur unchecked indefinitely, and if birth rate is not reduced, then population growth will eventually be checked by an increasing death rate. "Increasing death rate" is a euphemism for tremendous suffering, chaos, and dislocation. War, genocide, starvation, and plague are all examples of increasing death rates. Thus, overpopulation is an issue of national security.

Estimates of 2007 World, U.S., and Missouri population are 6.6 billion, 302 million, and 5.84 million respectively.<sup>ii</sup> The average impact of a U.S. citizen is many times that of a third world resident. Thus, the significance of our population outweighs its absolute size. World, U.S., and Missouri population growth rates are 1.2%, 0.9%, and 0.6% respectively. A 1.2% growth rate means world population doubles every 58 years. Estimates of the level of population that the world can sustain are often between 33% and 50% of current levels. If these estimates are correct, we need to not only reduce population growth to achieve sustainability, but to shrink population in absolute terms.<sup>iii</sup>

"Demographic conversion" refers to the inverse relation between standards of living and birth rate. In nations around the world, as living standards have risen, birth rates have declined. The relationship is powerful!<sup>iv</sup> It appears that rising living standards predate the decline in fertility in some cases. Thus, raising standards of living in poor countries may be one way to reduce birth rates.<sup>v</sup> Raising standards of living increases environmental impact, however, creating a Catch-22. Such things as economic security, freedom from disease, availability of birth control methods, women's participation in the work force, and women gaining the right to control their reproductive capacity have been hypothesized to cause demographic conversion.<sup>vi</sup>

Discussions of family planning run the risk of degenerating into arguments over abortion and sexual morals. They are separate issues. While there is no reason to oppose abstinence, there is little evidence that it can be widely carried out as a strategy for controlling birth rates. If one is not abstinent, many medical and surgical birth control methods are available that are widely socially acceptable. While no medical intervention is ever totally safe, the risks of most of these methods compare favorably to the risks of pregnancy and birth.<sup>vii</sup>

The population issue interfaces with the immigration issue. In some nations birth rates have declined below the replacement rate (declining population), causing a backlash. Immigration from poorer nations with growing populations often "makes up" for the low birth rates, in some cases causing xenophobia. In terms of sustainability, it makes little difference whether an individual is U.S. born or from Central America. Once they are here, they adopt American ways and have an American impact. Thus, from an environmental impact perspective, it does little good to hold our birth rate down, but allow unlimited immigration from nations with birth rates that remain high.

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<sup>i</sup> Thomas Malthus published *An Essay on the Principle of Population* in 1798. A copy of the 1826 edition is available online at Google Books: <http://books.google.com/books?id=ngQAAAAAMAAJ&pg=RA1-PR19&dq=Thomas+Malthus+Essay+Principles+Population>.

<sup>ii</sup> World population statistics are from the U.S. Census Bureau International Programs Center, [Hwww.census.gov/ipc.worldhis.html](http://www.census.gov/ipc.worldhis.html). U.S. population figures are from the U.S. Census Bureau for the year 2006.

<sup>iii</sup> An extensively referenced review of overpopulation is available at Wikipedia: [Hhttp://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Overpopulation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Overpopulation). *Food, Land, Population and the U.S. Economy* by Pimentel and Giampietro, a study for the National Research Institute on Food and Nutrition, is an example of one concluding that sustainability requires a drastic (2/3) reduction in world population.

<sup>iv</sup> The CIA World Fact Book contains data on both fertility rates and GDP for numerous countries. A graph of this data is also available at Wikipedia: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Fertility\\_Rate](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Fertility_Rate).

<sup>v</sup> The Wikipedia article on Overpopulation (Note 3) contains a discussion of demographic conversion, but see the Wikipedia article on Demographic Transition: [Hhttp://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographic\\_Transition](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographic_Transition).

<sup>vi</sup> The causes of demographic conversion are also discussed by the NGO Population Connection, see [Hhttp://www.Populationconnection.org/About\\_Us/policies](http://www.Populationconnection.org/About_Us/policies).

<sup>vii</sup> Almost 1/3 of the women who give birth each year experience some form of pregnancy complication. Two-to-three women die of pregnancy related causes every day in the United States. See *Pregnancy complications*, The Breast Cancer Site, <http://thebreastcancersite.healthology.com/womens-health/article3737.htm?pg=2>.