

Guest Editorial: Growth of Populations and its Effects

Never was there a better time, never was the issue more urgent, never was there greater need for common sense, logical thought, drastic action before now. How many times have we heard or thought these words in respect to some issue or another? Concerning the effect that man has on our planet there is indeed a case for these words to be spoken again. As we “progress” towards ever greater crowds, water shortages, atmospheric pollution, deforestation, energy shortages, congested roads, public health deficiencies, schooling problems, landfill rubbish disposal taking ever more available land, and generally more stress, the world should be looking urgently at controlling its population.

When do we pass the earth’s “carrying capacity” or when did we pass it? Did it slip by unnoticed only leaving us carried onward by our momentum, to reach ever greater numbers?

I feel extremely frustrated whenever I attempt a journey in or out of town and am delayed by seemingly endless traffic jams. I look at all the crawling traffic and think “there are just too many people on the road”. But planners will tell you this is a simple problem that could be solved by any government that plans instead of the successive governments that we’ve had who wait for events to overtake them then react. A flyover here and there, an extra lane on the highway or a rapid railway, or bus route and presto its solved! (We can now presumably proceed to buy more cars and fill up the new capacity and get back to the same old congestion).

Practically all the effects of population can be dismissed in this way. Technology will provide better farm productivity and feed the extra numbers. Some new invention will provide an alternative energy source so why worry about oil reserves. We can build bigger schools, bigger hospitals, bigger police stations, bigger offices and so on. All in all we haven’t begun to see how many people the earth can accommodate, so relax don’t worry, just go for growth!

But there must logically be a point where we have gone too far and overdone it. With advances in scientific knowledge this point appears to be shifting so that it seems to be always ahead of us, but quite possibly we have passed the “overload” point long ago with some of the many criteria and have set in motion a tide of “natural” reactions that will be extremely difficult to reverse.

The new awareness of global warming is probably the most alarming consequence of man’s over-abundance in the world. Even if the earth can “carry” the current population, apparently it can’t handle the people *plus* their inventions. Man’s inventions spew carbon dioxide into the atmosphere in disproportionately greater amounts to the population itself, so that twice the population creates more than twice the damage. If global warming produces the predicted rises in sea level (and it seems that consequences of global warming are accelerating faster than predicted)

we can expect large-scale losses of land area. In a world where we are already struggling to defend the natural environment from ever more encroachment by man, the future looks extremely unpleasant, but it’s a future that takes more than a generation to be upon us, so we all see bits of the degradation, but it takes two or three life spans to capture large changes. For instance, anyone born today grows up with traffic jams being the norm and doesn’t understand why older people think traffic is a problem.

Now you would think that logical minds would realise this problem and expect governments to plan preventative measures. Reducing the population through painless prevention of births is so obvious a solution that it is mind-boggling that it is not at the top of every politician’s priorities. In fact in practise we see the opposite. Politicians disassociate themselves from anyone who proposes a solution and hope the problem will just go away. Also a fall in population means a reduction in GDP, lower sales figures, less voters in a particular constituency, less *growth*. Heaven forbid we might even experience *deflation*! Countries like Singapore, Italy, and France are going to great lengths to encourage their people to have more children for fear of an economic downturn. Only China, and to some extent India, try to decrease their populations and the world frowns on them. China actually has a most enlightened population policy, but in world comment we hear only of the killing of girl children and the surplus of males that results. This is not a criticism of the policy, it is a criticism of the people who apply it.

We have grown up in a world that understands only growth. Success is measured in growth of GDP, turnover, profits, assets etc. A nation or a company or a town or a community that is not *growing* in as many measurable markers as possible is seen as a failure.

I would propose that this view is 180 degrees off course. If we all want to enjoy man’s inventions at every level of society the result will be no enjoyment at all. Trinidad and Tobago has seen this in the motor car, now so easily affordable to wider sections of the population. The result is the near gridlock we see in the mornings and afternoons. Imagine if every African or Indian were to have a motor car tomorrow, what a cloud of pollution would be added to the atmosphere from all those vehicles standing stationary in their respective gridlocks! If every Chinese or Indonesian could afford a cruise every year on a luxury liner imagine the congestion of every port and shipping channel, because not only would they be travelling but the increased world trade to support such wealth would require shipping of goods hither and thither. We can easily dream up horrific scenarios based on more people being able to enjoy the world’s inventions and the resulting chaos, even with a *static* population. These are quite clearly impossible, so “progress” is evidently aimed at those who are already wealthy and the gap between rich and poor widens, with the rich advancing and the poor staying where they are. By

this means the effects of progress are very much muted as the incremental numbers of the wealthy are much smaller than the total increase in numbers of people.

It is long past time for world leaders to recognise this and plan for a reduction in earth's population. If deflation were to result so be it. If everything costs less, why shouldn't one's assets decrease also? The sales value of my house to me is measured only in terms of what profit I would make, or how much more I would have to raise through a mortgage, if I were to sell it and buy another house. But it takes a bold and honest politician to admit this, and these are hard to find. Democracy would ensure

that such a politician would have a very short term in office. But my personal Utopia is a world with a shrinking population. A world where hospital waiting lists reduce, every child easily finds a school place, where towns shrink or stand still, forests expand, where technology advances and is available to all levels, where garbage disposal ceases to be a problem, where greenhouse gases drop dramatically and the oceans breathe again and fish stocks increase.

And I say to myself "what a wonderful world"!

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Cover photograph

The testa of the seed of the *Chaconia* after germination has taken place. A part of a cotyledon can be seen beneath the testa. The testa is highly ornamented with a network of ridges dividing the surface into 4 - 5 sided segments. The exposed surface of each segment is ornamented with reticulate to pitted thickenings. The colour of the testa is golden-brown; the blue tinge seen is caused by the stain used during preparation of the specimen. (EJD).