

DECLINING FERTILITY — WELCOME WHEREVER IT OCCURS

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Fertility rates in developed countries are declining and many are fearful of a future in which populations will be older and less numerous. These fears are unfounded since future generations may have a better quality of life in older, smaller nations.

The last issue of *People and Place* contained Peter McDonald's interesting account of fertility patterns in Australia as revealed in the 1996 census. The article suggests that fertility may continue to fall with the result that our population will both age and decline numerically. This is now the pattern in most developed nations and McDonald states that this is not 'in the long term interest of almost any developed country' and that 'fear of population decline is very well founded'. McDonald thus appears to regard the present population size of advanced nations as an optimum, and indeed fear of low fertility with its accompanying ageing and numerical decline is widespread. However, careful examination of the issues suggests that low fertility may not only be beneficial but essential to the future welfare of mankind.

OVERPOPULATION IN DEVELOPED COUNTRIES

Overpopulation is generally regarded as a problem only in poorer nations, however this view overlooks patterns of resource use — individuals in rich nations have a larger 'ecological footprint' than those in poor nations. Developed countries use huge amounts of fossil fuel to ensure that their needs are met, even if this means importing resources from poorer countries. One quarter of the world's population accounts for three quarters of all consumption. Many wealthy nations live way beyond the carrying capacity of their own resources and, from the point of view of the sustainable stewardship of this planet, overpopulation is far more serious in developed nations than in poor countries.¹ Switzerland and Singapore can be examined from this point of view.

In 1992 the Swiss Government requested a Report² on the human carrying capacity of that nation. An assessment was made of import/export patterns and it was found that Switzerland was living far beyond its ecological capacity. For the Swiss to live on their own sustainable resources with the same lifestyle their numbers would need to fall to one million (from the present seven millions). The Swiss live very well by providing services to other countries which can be traded to make up their ecological deficit, but the Report recognised that Switzerland was gradually draining the resources of the rest of the planet and that this could be regarded as both immoral and unsustainable.

The city state of Singapore has a flourishing service economy but imports most of its food and, despite receiving 2000 mm of rain each year, is not self sufficient in water. Huge pipelines bring water to the island from Malaysia. Singapore's wealthy inhabitants, like those of all modern cities, have a large ecological footprint and use natural resources from way

beyond their borders. Frequently city dwellers are only faintly aware of the distant hectares of productive land that provide for their needs and they discuss matters such as sustainability or overpopulation without reference to their own environmental impact.

Over the last few years much consideration has been given to the human carrying capacity of this planet and various regions within it. The RIO + 5 Conference was held to examine progress since the international conference on the environment held in Rio five years previously and it commissioned a Study entitled *Ecological Footprints of Nations: How Much Nature Do They Use? How Much Nature Do They Have?*³ This Study examines the ecological impact of 52 large nations, inhabited by 80 per cent of the world's population. It also shows to what extent the consumption of these nations can be supported by their local ecological capacity and finds that only 14 of the 52 are living within their own limits. Australia is shown as having, on a per capita basis, some excess ecological capacity, but a further study in the UK, which takes account of erratic rainfall, unsustainable agricultural practices and per capita greenhouse emissions, concludes that this continent is already living well beyond its environmental income.⁴ In other words we are spending our natural capital and leaving less capacity for ecological production for future generations.

Australia at the moment exports food and fibre but there is increasing evidence that her production is destroying supposedly 'renewable' resources. Salination, erosion, loss of fertility and soil compaction all threaten to reduce yields, and arguments over water use indicate that the driest continent may be stretching this resource to beyond its limits.⁵ If our numbers continue to rise, Australians in the future may require net imports of ecological goods and this, of course, relies on the perilous assumption that other countries will have a surplus to export.

Unfortunately ecological damage is not confined to Australia. Around the world fish stocks are declining, forests are dwindling and arable land is going out of production through unsustainable agricultural practices. World wide per capita food production has been declining for some years and the huge demands on the ecosystems of the planet made by wealthy humans indicate that low fertility in advanced countries is at least as important as it is in poorer nations.⁶

William E. Rees, Director of the School of Community and Regional Planning at the University of British Columbia expresses the problem thus:

We generally see technology as having made us less dependent on nature. In fact, it merely extends the efficiency and range of our exploitative activities. Together with trade, technology thus cushions us from the negative consequences of local resource depletion while invisibly expanding our ecological footprints.... Material consumption in high-income countries today increasingly exceeds their sustainable natural income.⁷

As McDonald points out, demographic momentum ensures that population decline due to low fertility takes a century or so to become significant. There is thus time to boost numbers if this is desirable, possibly through immigration. McDonald considers that high immigration may be 'politically unsustainable' but history does not entirely support him. Singapore, for

example, had a population of about 200 in 1800 and, after the island was adopted as a trading post by Britain, growth was due almost entirely to immigration. Singapore today is home to over two millions. Australia, over the last two hundred years, has seen its population grow twenty-fold, again because of immigrants and their descendants. Both Singapore and Australia have stable government and strong economies so there may be little barrier to any nation increasing its numbers through immigration if and when that nation was found to be under-populated.

AN AGEING SOCIETY

Fear of a ageing society is often expressed but an examination of the issue suggests that the fear is unfounded. As the proportion of elderly 'dependents' increases the proportion of children decreases and this may reduce, rather than increase, the burden on those of working age. We are very much aware of older people who require assistance because they often receive support from the taxpayer and are the subject of statistical studies but we tend to overlook the assistance needed by the young because it is taken for granted.

For example, in 1993 the Australian Bureau of Statistics published two studies on disability, ageing and carers.⁸ Activities for which help was required were self care, mobility, verbal communication, health care, home help, home maintenance, meal preparation, personal affairs, transport, financial management, taking medication, dressing wounds and writing letters. Such studies draw attention to the fact that *some* adults have difficulty looking after themselves and that the percentage needing help rises with age. But while we consider this problem we overlook the fact that *all* children need help with these tasks. A toddler cannot be described as being engaged in self-care, an older child may help around the house but only with supervision (and considerable encouragement), a teenager seeks advice when writing letters or handling money, and in areas with poor public transport children are not entirely mobile until they have not only their driver's licence and can afford their own car.

On average the demands we make on others are far less when we are seventy than they were when we were two, and misconceptions about this may arise from government expenditure. The support of children comes largely from families and therefore the cost does not appear in official statistics, while governments are generally involved in the care of the frail aged.⁹ In addition, the cost of child related expenses such as maternity wards, child care and schooling is not included in the equation.

In recent years various publications have noted the increasing health, wealth and independence of the elderly in this country — 'older people are more likely to be the providers rather than the receivers of many kinds of support — from....child-minding through to financial assistance...'¹⁰ The proportion receiving the old age pension is steadily falling and the elderly are 'increasing their share of wealth and political influence'.¹¹

Further evidence to allay fears of an ageing society can be gathered from an examination of countries with populations of differing age structures. Ethiopia, Jordan and Palestine have 'young' populations while Austria, Germany and Sweden are relatively 'old' countries. Which offer their citizens a better quality of life?

McDonald draws attention to disruption caused by demographic changes but societies age only over a period of decades — Australia is ageing by about one quarter of a per cent a year. This is negligible compared to other demographic changes of over five per cent per year that have occurred in some areas of this nation in recent years. In any case, adaptation to a smaller proportion of children is a very minor disruption compared to the misery caused if ecosystems collapse or populations are unable to access those ecosystems on which they depend. Individuals in advanced nations are not self sufficient and only the use of huge amounts of fossil fuels provides them with the necessities of life. Low fertility and an older society can reduce the dependence of wealthy countries on the products of distant lands.

CONCLUSION

Low fertility in developed nations is not to be feared — indeed it may be essential to the future well-being of humans and of this planet. Overpopulation is not an affliction solely of developing countries and we should not thoughtlessly regard the present population size of rich nations as an optimum. The large per capita ecological footprint of wealthy individuals makes great demands on natural resources and low fertility is as least as important among rich nations as it is among poor nations. Low fertility leads gradually to a higher average age in the population as a whole but longevity is one of the criteria of a successful society and can bring many benefits.

Rather than lamenting low fertility we should plan for the slow changes it will bring since, wherever it occurs, low fertility should be welcomed.

References

1 For accounts of global resource depletion and the demands of wealthy countries see: D. and M. Pimentel, (Eds), *Food, Energy and Society*, University Press of Colorado, 1996; C. Ponting *A Green History of the World*, Penguin Books 1993; and the *State of the World* series by the Worldwatch Institute, Washington DC0.

2 G. Pillet, *Towards an Inquiry into the Carrying Capacity of Nations: What does Over-Population Mean?* Report to the Coordinator for International Refugee Policy, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, CH 3003 Berne, 1991

3 M. Wackernagel, *Ecological Footprints of Nations: How Much Nature Do They Use? How Much Nature Do They Have?* Centro de Estudios para la Sustentabilidad, Universidad Anahuac de Xalapa and The Earth Council, Costa Rica, 1997. Available from: The International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives, City Hall, 100 Queen St, West Toronto ON M5H 2N2 Canada.

4 A. Ferguson, *The Carrying Capacity and Ecological Footprints of Nations* Optimum Population Trust, Taf Alaw, Llanfallteg, Dyfed SA 34 0UW, UK. Personal communication 1998

5 See, for example, T. F. Flannery *The Future Eaters: An Ecological History of the Australasian Lands and People*, Reed Books, Chatswood NSW, 1994 or M. E. White, *Listen..... Our Land is Crying*, Kangaroo Press, Kenthurst NSW, 1997.

6 See endnote 1.

7 W. E. Rees, quoted in Wackernagel *op. cit.* p. 16. It is probable that all developed nations are consuming beyond the long term capacity of their environment to support them, but a discussion of the issue is beyond the scope of this paper.

8 *Disability & Disabling Conditions*, Catalogue No. 4433.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), Canberra 1993; *Brain Injury and Stroke*, Catalogue No. 4437.0, ABS, Canberra 1993

9 See, for example, the comments on page 28 of *Australian Social Trends 1994* Catalogue No. 4102.0, ABS, Canberra 1994, and the reference to *Household Expenditure Survey, Australia: the Effects of Government Benefits and Taxes on Household Income*, Catalogue No. 6537.0, ABS, Canberra 1989.

10 *NSW Families: A Profile*, Catalogue No. 4426.1, ABS, Canberra 1994, p. 56

11 J. McCallum and K. Geiselhart, *Australia's New Aged*, Allen and Unwin, St. Leonards NSW, 1996, p. 2

Back to [Contents Vol. 6 No. 2](#)

Back to [People and Place Home Page](#)