

On Population

—A response to George Monbiot

Tormod V. Burkey, PhD in conservation biology/
population dynamics, and author of [Ethics for a Full
World](#).

The Guardian has published yet another population denying [column by George Monbiot](#). Monbiot places himself firmly in the “all is consumption” camp when he writes: *“If we had the global population of 500 years ago (around 500 million), and if it were composed of average UK plane passengers, our environmental impact would probably be greater than that of the 7.8 billion alive today.”*

We have this nifty trick in science and logic called “All else equal”. Monbiot should try it.

Applying all else equal, if we were 500 million alive today, with the same wealth distribution and consumption patterns, etc. as the global population today, 500 million people would impose more like $500 \text{ million} / 7.8 \text{ billion} = 5/78 = 6.4\%$ of the ecological footprint that we have today. It is a facetious trick to replace 500 million of the world’s inhabitants with 500 million UK plane passengers.

The truth is, of course, that it is about consumption *and* about population. It is also about technological efficiency, or waste. **It would be silly to be concerned about consumption but not the number of consumers.**

Yes, it is quite possible to make the argument that for a while now consumption has been rising more rapidly than population. But all that consumption was done by people who were born. Some also claim that the corollary of that is that we can reduce consumption more rapidly than we can reduce population. That remains to be seen, however. There is no indication that we know what is needed to get humanity as a whole to consume less. We have made some advances towards getting humans to waste less, by increasing technological efficiency. Yet food waste is still a huge problem in the richest countries in the world. And eating animals is perhaps the greatest waste of all. Traditionally it has been customary to consider that 90% of the

energy is lost at each trophic level, to movement, thermo-regulation, brain activity, etc. It will probably also be difficult to keep people being born today in poor countries from eating more meat than their predecessors did. If we quickly transition to eating lab meat perhaps that will be an advance in cutting waste that can counter some of the increase in population.

It has not been proven, however, that technical improvements generally lead to reductions in overall consumption. Improvements don't necessarily replace old wasteful technologies, but simply add to them. And Jevons's paradox has been abundantly demonstrated: as cars and airplanes become more efficient we more than compensate by flying and driving more, because the direct costs, on our own wallets, have gone down. Or we might use the money saved on one aspect of our lives on other activities that may still be very harmful. If you have the money, you are going to spend it one way or another. Or you will put it in the bank and someone else will.

Of course it is "all of the above". **We have let things go so far at this point, that we must do it all.** We need better technology and reduced waste/inefficiency, lower average consumption, *and* a lower number of humans.

Whataboutism

Stop arguing over what is the single greatest factor. We have to deal with them all anyway. It is not a contest. And even if we acknowledge that we might be able to do more, more quickly, if we do the most cost-effective things first, we'll still have to do pretty much "all of the above", and we don't want to simply wait around until we can get humanity to do them in the perfect rank-ordered sequence. Worry less about proceeding in the ideal order, and more about getting shit done in the first place.

Nor is our ecological footprint all a matter of greenhouse gas emissions, as Monbiot seems to imply. Yes, the poor people who have the highest number of offspring do not fly very much and usually eat relatively little meat. However, they do need food. Some may eat bushmeat, or they may be clamoring for jobs etc., which puts pressure on governments etc. to provide economic opportunities, infrastructure, allow clearing of land and

give companies access to land for logging, mining, tulip cultivation, etc. Biodiversity loss is much more tightly linked to the number of poor people than is climate change. Yet. In the future, the poor people being born today, and their descendants, may have much greater per capita climate impact than they do now. **Only the unborn can have an ecological footprint of zero.**

It is not a matter of blaming the poor. Nor is it about racism.

Those averse to talking about population issues predictably misinterpret them to mean that they are only about *population growth*. Then you can claim that people who don't ignore human population numbers are racists who try to shift the blame from rich people who consume a lot to poor people whose countries have rapid population growth rates. This is a confusion of population growth with population size. That may be understandable, because over the long term high growth rates, if they persist, will eventually lead to a large population size. However, our ecological impact is largely a function of the *absolute population size*, more than it is about growth rates. The growth rate is only relevant indirectly, as it alters the population size over time. Today's population size is a function of past population growth, like tomorrow's population size is a product of today's population size and population growth rate. In rich countries population growth rates were high in the past and we now have population sizes that are too high. To get that population size down we need *negative* population growth rates, not just low (positive) growth rates. Having low population growth rates today does not let rich countries off the hook, because our growth rates need to be negative. There are too many mega-consumers. And if poor countries ever get richer, there will be even more in the future.

Rich people's reproduction is every bit as problematic as poor people's reproduction. Most likely much worse, depending on which environmental parameter you are looking at. Even if it were true that rich, white people have fewer children than other people, the environmental impact of each one is likely much worse.

We might also question which way the causality lies, whether poor countries have high birth rates, or if countries with high birth rates remain poor while countries that

control birth rates become wealthy. Anyway, if poor countries have high population growth rates and low consumption/emissions today, it won't stay that way forever.

Rich countries had high population growth rates in the past, but now they have high consumption rates and consumptive growth. Without that population growth, the world's rich people would not have such a great impact on climate and biodiversity as they do today. **It is as if countries trade high birth rates for high consumption.** If those high birth rates had been reduced sooner, there wouldn't be so many rich people today with high environmental impacts.

It is as if Monbiot and others are intent on keeping those poorer nations poor forever. Yet, even if they did acknowledge that we could reduce population growth rates through education and empowerment of women, that process would also turn them, and their descendants, into the high consumers that they decry.

Birth rates need to come down in rich countries and poor countries alike. We have been too many humans for a long time already. Being a population denier is not helping. And you still need to do all the things the population deniers suggest we do, and more. But will we?

The rich countries of the world had high population growth rates in the past. Which is why some people gripe about imagined difficulties to come with an aging population. **The problems isn't that we have too low population growth rates in the present, but that growth rates were too high in the past. You don't solve problems by continuing the same behavior that got you into the problem in the first place.**

Letting populations keep growing just means that we will have to deal with it later, when the problems are even worse. Some might argue that the social costs might be lower when we reduce birth rates very very slowly, and they may be right, in a limited sort of way. We certainly are doing things very very slowly, or even just leaving them up to chance, but at the same time it is clear that we have other very real problems, like climate breakdown and biodiversity

meltdown, and these need to be solved quickly.

Bringing population growth rates down is only a first step to obtaining negative population growth and actual reduction of the human population SIZE. We should, at the very least, leave half the area of the planet to other species. And not destroy the climate that we share with those other species. Having fewer humans around is a win-win in so many ways.

We are not saying to reduce population growth rates only in the countries where they are highest, but to reduce them everywhere. All countries should have negative population growth rates, at least until their population sizes and population densities are much smaller than they are today.

Nor can you blame continued population growth in western countries on immigration. Generally these countries still have birth surpluses independent of immigration. It's simple: just go back and look at the number of births and the number of deaths in a given country.

At the very least we should stop denying that there is a human population issue.

Fertility rates may be declining globally, but we have to do better. If we stopped breeding today we would immediately go from growing by 80 million people per year to declining by 60 million per year. Of course, no one expects reproduction to stop altogether, but we could do a lot better than we are doing.

The birth of a rich child should be a matter of particular concern. Yet, sadly, it appears that almost all people that are brought into this world will struggle to become richer. And the problem will not solve itself, as many appear to believe. Stopping the growth is just a necessary first step towards bringing the population size *down*. Population growth has to turn negative, and it has to do it in time.

If you are inclined to protest that someone is trying to take your reproductive freedom away from you, you should blame those who had too many children in the past.

Those keen to acknowledge that we can't have an expanding economy on a finite planet, should at least also acknowledge

that a steady state economy ultimately requires a stable population as well. Nor is it clear that that stable population size should be eight billion, or eleven billion humans, rather than one or two.

For population contraction to occur we just need to do more of what we already know how to do. All developed nations have succeeded in reducing fertility rates. None has ever systematically managed to reduce consumption.

Though it is a mistake to think that enough of us actually want to cut our reproduction *enough*. In fact, there seems to be a U-shaped relationship, where past a certain point, as you get *even richer* you might start having larger families again. Perhaps as yet another status symbol... More must be done to change how many children people want, both in developing countries and in rich countries, and some of us may have to be enticed or persuaded to have less than they might have wanted initially. Awareness campaigns and various forms of public messaging may help with that. Refusing to acknowledge that the size of the human population is part of the problem is not helping.

No other choice we make in life has greater environmental impact than that of creating another consumer, which will in turn create more consumers, which will create more consumers, and so on.

Unwillingness

It is a bit like the climate issue and the size of the economy. Some people would like to focus on technofixes and efficiency, because they feel this is more comfortable than the hard choices and “sacrifices” people would have to make in order to reduce consumption and population. Some want to focus on consumption, because they are unwilling to reduce their reproduction, or feel uncomfortable with communicating that people perhaps should not be “free” to have as many children as they would like. It is frequently claimed that people who talk about population do not want to sacrifice their high levels of consumption, their meat-eating, or their frequent flying. But that coin has two sides: why don't the “all is consumption” camp want to talk about reducing their birth rates? And not being willing to reduce one's fecundity is particularly egregious when we know all the consumption and collateral

damage that follows from another birth (including, possibly, an endless string of births)—*particularly* in a rich country.

Some people simply don't want to acknowledge that *their* having children is part of the problem. Just like some don't want to acknowledge that their own high consumption is part of the problem. Those who blame others for not being willing to address their high consumption levels should acknowledge that their own unwillingness to address reproductive choices is an equal part of the problem.

I get into this frequently with members of the Green Party, who are frequently accused of telling people what they should do and what choices they should make. In my mind it gets embarrassing, and I am just waiting for the day one of their political opponents point this out, that frequently the matter of not having children is off the table for them. All sorts of "sacrifices" they themselves are willing to entertain, but not that one. And they don't like it when someone points out this is a very consequential environmental choice they are making. Different people have different things they don't want to (at the moment) give up—though this might be malleable through public awareness campaigns and advertising (as people, including economists, believe many things are). There seems to be many things people don't like to be told.

These "Greens" are happy to go without a car, but they will not at all countenance the notion of going without a child or two. Pitched in the language of choice, some might be willing to give up meat *and* a fossil fueled car, but they refuse to give up children. They are perhaps critical of those who won't give up a car, or refuse to give up meat. Some are willing to give up meat, but are unwilling to be vegan. Others might be willing to give up children, but not air travel, or meat, or their gas guzzler.

The first thing to do is to get people to stop thinking about population as a non-issue. Dropping the OpEds and the columns that do just that would be a good place to start.