

Demography/Ecology: Family Planning and the Environment

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The Landscapes on Uncrowded.org are conspicuously lacking in people: a spacious meadow, a desert stretching to a distant mountain range, and a calm expanse of water. The Washington D.C. non-profit promotes a troubling message against this bucolic backdrop. They claim that national and international laws encourage irresponsible childbearing and overly large populations.

Population growth, they argue, is responsible for environmental degradation, as well as other societal problems:

“Whether the average person alive today has between 1 and 2 children, or between 2 and 3 children, will largely determine whether our children live in a world that is safe, healthy, and sustainable, or crowded and polluted, with little if any nature, fewer resources and more crime.” [\[1\]](#).

Unfortunately, blaming environmental problems on population pressure is all too common, particularly among environmentalists. This thinking has a long tradition extending as far back as the late 1700s, when Thomas Malthus predicted that the rate of population growth would inevitably outpace food production.

Malthus’ forecast did not anticipate technological innovation or the demographic transition to lower birth rates, and was not accurate, but it did influence generations of environmental thinkers.

In the 1960s butterfly biologist Paul Ehrlich, with his 1968 *The Population Bomb* and non-profit group Zero Population Growth (now Population Connection), became one of most well known modern Malthusian thinkers. So did Garrett Hardin, with his influential essay “The Tragedy of the Commons,” along with the Club of Rome and their best-selling book *Limits to Growth*.

Today, despite the sordid history of top-down population control programs violating reproductive and human rights and the major slowing of global population growth, many environmentalists still promote the view that population size is the primary cause of climate change and other environmental problems.

Books like Alan Weisman’s 2013 *Countdown* explores how we can reduce birth rates to save the planet. Uncrowded calls for smaller families. The Sierra Club promotes population reduction. Environmental groups and individuals like these promote family planning or one- or two-child families as the solution to some of the most pressing environmental problems we face.

As a long-time supporter of comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights, I believe that all people should have access to a range of contraception and safe abortion as part of overall health services. Family planning, however, is not the answer to our environmental problems.

Misguided Focus

Environmentalists' focus on population — and ultimately on the bodies of those who produce children — is misguided and can lead to equally misguided action.

As ARROW (the Asian-Pacific Resource & Research Centre for Women in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia) points out, "The dangers of undue emphasis on population reduction to address climate change are clear. It jeopardizes decades of work to advance multifaceted, rights-respecting, environmentally sound and equitable development models." [2].

Environmental degradation and climate change are urgent problems that need careful consideration and action. We should strive to better understand their sources, so we can arrive at socially just responses that benefit the environment, people and our communities.

This means recognizing when population trends like urbanization and density have an environmental impact. However, it also requires challenging the notion that population is inevitably the source of environmental problems. We should take on what eco-socialists Ian Angus and Simon Butler call "populationism" in environmentalism.

Smaller family size is the global norm. The global average today is 2.53 children per family, down from 4.9 in the 1960s. Many countries, mainly in East Asia and Eastern Europe, have less than two children per family. Birthrates are down because of factors like improved health services, education and status of women, and increased urbanization.

In other countries, mostly in Sub-Saharan Africa, the average family size is higher, with over four children per woman. Fertility rates are declining in those countries as well despite the lack of health services in many regions, and persistent poverty, high mortality and gender inequalities, which can contribute to high birth rates.

At the same time that family size is getting smaller, global population is growing due to what is called "population momentum." This means that there are a high proportion of people in the population who are in childbearing years (15-44) and who will have children and add to the overall population. Population size is expected to grow through 2100, then plateau and slowly decline.

Even with the global shift towards smaller families, and the slower pace of population growth, many environmentalists claim that change is not happening fast enough. For example, the Sierra Club's Global Population and Environment Program declares that "the combination of rapid population growth in developing countries, with unsustainable consumption in developed countries, is threatening the health and well-being of families, communities, and our planet." [3]

There are a number of problems with this way of thinking. First, babies and yet-to-be-born babies in areas like Sub-Saharan Africa are not responsible for existing environmental problems. The reverse is true: wealthy countries like the United States are responsible for burdening those babies with a legacy of global environmental degradation and climate change caused by long-term, irresponsible resource use by the overly-developed world.

These very real environmental problems require our creativity and persistent attention now.

Averting future births will not help clean up toxic nuclear weapons contamination, like that at Manhattan Project's Hanford Nuclear Reservation in Washington State. Reducing population rates will not support those displaced by rising sea levels. Nor will it hold accountable those who are most responsible for climate change — like the U.S. military — for their carbon emissions.

As feminist peace activist Pat Hynes tells us, “the military has 1.4 million active duty people, or .0002 percent of the world's population, generating 5 percent of climate pollution. The U.S. military enterprise is far and away the largest single climate polluter and contributor to global warming.” [4].

Whose Consumption?

A second problem with the Sierra Club's stance is that it links consumption levels with population size and individual consumption. Consumption of resources is an important issue: wealthy nations consume more than less wealthy ones — but an overemphasis on individual consumption distracts from industrial and commercial consumption.

Corporations, like the military and the ultra-consuming, ultra-wealthy are the reason for a disproportionate share of resource depletion, carbon emissions, waste and pollution. These powerful actors should be held responsible for their actions.

As Ian Angus and Simon Butler point out in *Too Many People?* “those who claim slowing population growth will stop or slow environmental destruction are ignoring the real and immediate threats to life on our planet. Corporations and armies aren't polluting the world and destroying eco-systems because there are ‘too many people,’ and they won't stop if the birth rate is reduced.”

Yet, try to reduce birth rates many environmentalists will. The Sierra Club asserts that voluntary family planning is the way to hasten population reduction. In fact, they claim that increased use of family planning could reduce carbon emissions at an equal rate as stopping all tropical deforestation. [5].

This big statement can't be backed up, however. The Sierra Club bases it on a publication from Population Action International, which in turn cites a study that never mentions family planning at all.

In fact, the article by Pacala and Socolow in *Science* (Volume 305, August 13, 2004 [6]) discusses solving our climate problems through existing technologies, such as reducing deforestation and promoting soil conservation. Still, the Sierra Club tells us that family planning is a win-win, for women and the environment.

Another example is PopOffsets, a project of the British nonprofit organization Population Matters, which is backed by patron Paul Ehrlich among others. It claims to help individuals and groups offset their carbon footprint through donating funds to support family planning projects. Moneyed individuals can supposedly offset their air travel or luxury hotel stays by enabling others to limit their family size.

PopOffsets channels the funds to family planning projects in places like Kenya, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Utah, New York and Adelaide, Australia. Similar to the logic behind carbon offset programs for corporations, like REDD+, PopOffsets invites people to continue with their business as usual, while holding others accountable.

Claims that family planning directly benefits the environment are hard to back up. The

environmental group Worldwatch Institute is a major advocate for family planning to achieve environmental sustainability. Their new initiative, the Family Planning and Environmental Sustainability Assessment (FPESA) projects, seeks to establish the relationship.

Given the skewed questions guiding their inquiry — such as “Does recent peer-reviewed research affirm that family planning brings ecological benefits and thus is worth supporting by environmental leaders and others committed to sustainability?” — no doubt they will find an affirmative answer.

Structural Change is Essential

The emphasis on family planning as an environmental fix sidetracks us from making investments into infrastructure and health systems, like clean energy, food security or mass transit to support healthy communities and advance social justice. In consistently ignoring the biggest polluters, it keeps us from holding the worst of them accountable.

Instead, family planning is promoted as a technical fix for much more complex problems that require structural change. It's thought to promote smaller family size, and many environmentalists like Uncrowded push for small families. On their website, you can sign on to their pledge to have one, or at most two, children, or to adopt instead. [7]

The organization believes “that we all have a moral obligation to protect the environment, and that we should consider the environment when choosing how many children to have.” [8]

They advocate incentive programs and laws that limit family sizes and regulate reproductive decisions for those whose moral compass might lead them to have more than two children. Uncrowded believes these measures are necessary to regulate those who do not meet their vague standards for quality parenting, which include a “particular minimum of well-being and development.” [9].

The pledge to have one or two children is mild compared to GINK, which stands for “Green Inclinations, No Kids.” Subscribers to “GINK think” believe that having no children is the ultimate “green” act. Lisa Hymas, who created the label, says “the single most meaningful contribution I can make to a cleaner, greener world is to not have children.” [10]

GINK, a play on the Reagan-era yuppie label DINK (Dual Income, No Kids) is, like DINK, about personal wealth creation. Hymas emphasizes it as a benefit of having no children, as well as not having to contend with crumbs and toys. That wealth creation might lead to greater consumption on a household level, even if that household is “childfree,” is an issue she ignores.

An early subscriber to single-child families recently changed his mind. In his 1998 book *Maybe One: A Personal and Environmental Argument for Single-Child Families*, environmentalist Bill McKibben made a plea for small families, arguing that people in the United States should have fewer children (1.5 per woman), while reducing immigration rates in order to reduce environmental damage.

By 2013, McKibben had changed his stance on immigration and softened his emphasis on small families. His March 14, 2013 op-ed in the LA Times suggested that immigrants' fertility was not the source of environmental destruction. Rather he called for immigration reform and stated “It will help, not hurt, our environmental efforts, and potentially in deep and powerful ways.”

He went on to say that individual households' fertility choices are not at the heart of the problem: “one household at a time — scientists, policy wonks and economists have concluded it will also

require structural change. We may need, for example, things such as a serious tax on carbon; that will require mustering political will to stand up to the fossil fuel industry.” [11]

Lessons of Population Control

Instead of resolving environmental problems, promotion of family planning to save the planet may well create or exacerbate problems in reproductive health and rights.

For one, it upholds family planning as a tool to achieve national and international goals like economic growth, environmental sustainability or national security.

At the same time, it points to women’s bodies as appropriate targets for intervention in the name of a greater good. The abuses of population control show what can happen when women’s health is second to other, more powerful, agendas.

Not that population control is a thing of the past. China’s one-child policy, while somewhat relaxed, still strictly regulates and restricts fertility, particularly in cities. [12]

In some states in India, two-child norms keep people with more than two children from sitting on local governing boards or from receiving government benefits. Romani women in Central Europe, and women living with HIV in parts of Africa and Latin America undergo forced and coerced sterilizations. A 2014 audit of California women’s prisons found that tubal ligations were performed for the purposes of sterilization, sometimes without the consent of the inmate.

As these examples show, the incentives and restrictive laws that Uncrowded suggests are necessary to curb population growth exist in some places, even though they run counter to international standards. The 1994 International Conference on Population and Development’s Program of Action, or “consensus,” was endorsed by most of the world’s governments and came out against the use of coercion, incentives and disincentives in family planning provision.

In this context, endorsing population reduction as an environmental prerogative is a loaded choice. Most environmentalists, seeking to distance themselves from population control by promoting the health and empowerment of women, advocate for providing contraception only for those who want but don’t currently have access to it. Family planning is thought to enable women to prevent pregnancy and reduce population growth: a boon to both women and the environment.

But family planning is not just about preventing pregnancy, and helping people to control their fertility does not ensure their sexual and reproductive health and rights. People have a range of needs, both to prevent pregnancy and to get pregnant, and to practice safer sex.

Sexual and reproductive health services should include access to a full range of contraception methods, and with instructions on use and potential adverse effects. They should include education on sexuality, healthy relationships and gender identity. They should provide HIV prevention and treatment, safe abortion, and child and maternal health services among others.

Narrowing family planning to pregnancy prevention unnecessarily restricts reproductive health and can have damaging consequences. For one thing, contraceptives are not fail-proof. People get pregnant even when using them and may require other services, like abortion or pre-natal care.

We need to advocate for a full range of services, particularly when anti-abortion and anti-contraception activists are pushing restrictive laws and policies in different parts of the world,

including the United States.

When family planning overemphasizes pregnancy prevention over other issues, it too easily leaves out gay and transgender people and those who are not of reproductive age, who also need a range of services. Finally, overemphasis on pregnancy prevention can mean that other health considerations can rank as secondary.

A recent international campaign for the hormonal contraceptive Depo-Provera is an example. The medical non-profit PATH, the Gates Foundation, UNFPA, DfID and USAID are distributing the Sayana Press, an injectible dispenser of Depo-Provera, in Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Niger, Senegal and Uganda. Their goal is to reach three million women.

Depo-Provera is associated with a number of adverse effects, including loss of bone density, prolonged and irregular bleeding, and depression. There is also compelling evidence that it nearly doubles the risk of HIV acquisition and transmission. The World Health Organization and Center for Disease Control recommend that women who use Depo-Provera should also use condoms as a precautionary measure.

In the midst of debate about the evidence about Depo and HIV — studies show mixed results — rollout of the Sayana Press is happening on a large scale, including areas like Uganda, with high HIV prevalence rates.

The Gates Foundation, a partner in the Sayana Press and powerful donor in the international family planning establishment, believes that population growth is at the root of many social ills, including environmental degradation. The foundation's strategy for family planning states that population growth will "put pressure on social services and resources, and contribute significantly to the global burden of disease, environmental degradation, poverty and conflict." [\[13\]](#)

Towards Social Justice

We can and must address environmental problems, including climate change, while upholding social justice.

This means reforming the systems and institutions that perpetuate environmental degradation, while fighting the vast global inequalities in wealth, health and prosperity. It means promoting comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights for all people, in the context of healthy families and communities.

To this end, we should follow feminist Giovanna Di Chiro's suggestion of forming "living environmental and social justice movements" coalitions that are dynamically and simultaneously committed to environmental, climate and reproductive justice. [\[14\]](#)

Environmentalists who promote family planning do have one thing right — we should be working across movements and issues for greater strength and relevance. However, we must keep social justice at the heart of our work, and refuse to blame women's fertility for environmental degradation.

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P.S.

* From Against the Current n°173, November-December 2014:

<http://www.solidarity-us.org/node/4282>

Footnotes

[1] <http://uncrowded.org/our-mission/we...>

[2] <http://arrow.org.my/publications/AF...>

[3] <http://www.sierraclub.org/populatio...>

[4] <http://popdev.hampshire.edu/project...>

[5] <http://www.sierraclub.org/populatio...>

[6] <https://www.princeton.edu/mae/peopl...>

[7] <http://uncrowded.org/the-pledge/>

[8] <http://uncrowded.org/what-makes-us-...>

[9] <http://uncrowded.org/what-makes-us-...>

[10] <http://grist.org/article/2010-03-30...>

[11] <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/ma...>

[12] <http://popdev.hampshire.edu/project...>

[13] <https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/Do...>

[14] <http://popdev.hampshire.edu/sites/d...>