

Paul and Anne Ehrlich's 1968 book, The Population Bomb, was what got the population movement in America off to its start. Their newest book revisits the issue and documents the galloping consumption of resources by an ever-expanding world population. This book review is reprinted from Worldwatch magazine with their kind permission.

DISARMING THE HUMAN BOMB

A Book Review

THE POPULATION EXPLOSION By Paul R. and Anne R. Ehrlich

Mahatma Ghandi once said about human appetites that there is enough for every person's need, but not for some people's greed. Unfortunately, the world's population has practically doubled since Ghandi's time. Greed or no, there may not be enough to meet the needs of the planet's next arrivals, let alone the 11 to 14 billion the United Nations predicts will inhabit the earth when human population finally stabilizes.

This is the case made by Paul and Anne Ehrlich, outspoken population experts, in their latest book, *The Population Explosion*. Reckless resource use, compounded by human numbers, account for the fact that we are already devouring our home and pushing out other life forms. If international cooperation cannot be mustered soon, say the authors, "nature will end the population explosion for us--in very unpleasant ways--well before a population of 10 billion is reached."

The Ehrlichs spend the better part of their book making the case that "the entire planet and virtually every nation is already vastly overpopulated." They do this by providing a cold, factual account of disappearing resources, injured ecosystems, a threatened atmosphere, intractable poverty, and endangered human health.

Overpopulation, in the authors' estimation, is not measured in sheer numbers, but in *homo sapiens'* impact on the environment. The Ehrlichs have developed a loose formula for measuring this value: Impact = Population x Level of Affluence x Prevailing Technologies' Effect on the Environment. Using this tool, the authors contend that the United States is currently overpopulated, due more to the high value of the country's affluence and technology factors than to the size of its population. South Florida, with its pollution, evicted wildlife, and disrupted hydrology, is testimony to overdevelopment in the search for affluence, and is, in the Ehrlichs' opinion, overpopulated.

Another way of interpreting human numbers is found in the carrying capacity of a region. Neatly defined, a region's carrying capacity is the population it can sustain without swift exhaustion of its non-renewable resources (fossil fuels, metals, topsoil, slow-filling aquifers, and biodiversity) and damage to its

renewable resources (rivers and forests). When human demand--whether in pursuit of survival or affluence--surpasses the environment's carrying capacity, there are too many people.

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In the case of the Netherlands, which supports 1,031 people per square mile, the country's original carrying capacity is artificially extended through the importation of grains, oils, peas, beans and lentils. Were the country unable to exchange its industrial and other goods for grain on the world market, its real carrying capacity would collapse under the full weight of the Dutch's dietary needs.

On the African continent, the population is not just theoretically exceeding carrying capacity, it will soon be staring at an empty larder. South of the Sahara, per-capita food production has declined by 20 percent since 1968. The continent's population is growing at around 3 percent a year, which will lead to a doubling in 24 years. Little productive land remains unbroken by African farmers' plows. Kenya is already unable to provide for itself, and yet the country's population is expected to double in less than twenty years.

If we don't end the population explosion soon, say the Ehrlichs, there are only two possible scenarios awaiting us: "the Bang" or "the Whimper." The bang would be an instant finale -- probably nuclear war. What the whimper will be like is harder for the Ehrlichs to predict, but it may be a virus or a famine or another grim reaper assuring the "uneven but relatively continuous deterioration of the human condition over the next four to six decades."

Surprisingly, the Ehrlichs are generally optimistic about the human species' ability to skirt these unpleasant fates, if only we take corrective measures now. But they seem too hopeful that culture will make up for nature. Skipped over is serious consideration of the

religious and cultural barriers population control efforts may encounter in countries such as Bangladesh, India, Iran, Iraq, or Syria. In these and other nations, male vigor, ethnic or religious pride, and international standing may all be staked on family size.

The Ehrlichs also fail to attach enough importance to improving women's legal rights, social status, and opportunities for education and health care, though all are found to have an 'unexpected' connection to lower fertility rates. Women's low status, lack of education and job security are a general prescription for early marriage and high fertility, especially in countries where young children contribute to a family's survival through subsistence work and later provide for their parents' security in old age.

Lastly, the authors seem to say that it is more important for Americans to have fewer children than to forgo the fruits of affluence. But stressing First World population size rather than affluence--especially in a country as richly endowed as the United States--seems strange, given the Ehrlichs' earlier lecture on the role of affluence and technology in their impact equation. They admit "dramatic changes in American lifestyle might suffice to end overpopulation in the

family planning efforts leaves the impression that coercion might be an unfortunate recourse.

These and other problems are among the snags that THE POPULATION EXPLOSION navigates smoothly around. To the authors' credit, they seem aware of the treacherous stretches found in the population discussion. However, the time for gentle persuasion, they might say, has almost run out.

The Ehrlichs, along with many other demographers, feel that the 1990s are the last decade in which we can stop the human population's geometric growth. If this husband and wife team appears to be in a rush, it's because they know that how quickly we take action will determine whether we repair--or finally gut--our only home.

--By Ann Misch

United States without a large population reduction," but then quickly point out that a more spartan lifestyle is purely hypothetical, not practical.

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Will it be any easier, though, to bring Third World family size down from today's average of 4.8 children per couple to one, as the Ehrlichs call for? In Kenya, achieving this goal would mean having six or seven fewer children. And what of the consequences in countries where the status of women is low and where the birth of a female child is mourned rather than celebrated. One doesn't need a vivid imagination to conjure up the many discarded female fetuses and children as women struggle to produce a solitary male heir.

The authors fail to specify exactly how developing countries will meet their population goals should they bravely adopt any. Their mixed review of China's