

HOW MANY PEOPLE CAN EARTH SUPPORT?

By Jean-Michel Cousteau

In Thailand, in the waters off Ko Born Island, our divers encountered a rarely filmed ritual - the mating of squid. Each female entered a small hollow in the reef that served as a "group nursery" and deposited her eggs on the ceiling. Then the female exited and swam away, leaving the offspring to hatch unattended. Some would survive, others would be vanquished by forces of the ocean and predators.

The scene was mesmerizing, with the tiny eggs, luminous globules, hanging in clusters like lanterns in the sea.

One of the most miraculous aspects of our environment is the process of the creation of life, the inexorable cycle wherein organisms recreate themselves, programmed by nature to perpetuate their species. Reproduction biology, indeed, inspires awe.

In the case of humans, however, reproduction also inspires worry. The re-creation of human life, however, beautiful, is now presenting us with global environmental challenges unknown before World War II. Consider some undeniable facts:

- By the year 2000, world population, now more than 5 billion, will exceed 6 billion, roughly equivalent to adding another China in just 10 years.
- In the 1950s, world population was roughly 2.5 billion. It took hundreds of thousands of years to reach that point. Since then, we have added more people than any generation since the first appearance of human beings on the planet.
- This amazing growth in human population has occurred along with increased industrialization, and improvement in living standards for some peoples. Thus, more people are consuming more resources.

For example, according to Dr. Nathan Kayfitz, a population expert affiliated with Harvard University, by the year 2025 there will be four times as many automobiles being driven on earth compared to the 500 million cars currently on the roads. The implication of this increased traffic alone on global warming, air quality, and energy consumption should be, in a word, frightening to anyone who takes a moment to think about it.

So, when one speaks of overpopulation today, one does not mean simply that there are too many people. One means that there are too many people to ensure that habitable areas remain habitable, and certainly too many people to ensure that untouched resources can be preserved for future generations.

If this were not so, we would not be destroying, for example, in a single lifetime, forests that have taken centuries to evolve and grow. Indeed, even in China, where population control is a high government priority, according to Dr. Paul Ehrlich, author of The Population Explosion, "Annual consumption of wood for building, paper and fuel remains 50 percent higher than regrowth, despite serious reforestation attempts."

And forest depletion is only one example of the ways humans are testing the capacity of the planet.

Once, environmental protection meant for most maintaining wide-open spaces, the great outdoors, scenic vistas, cuddly animals. Later, with more sophisticated understanding, environmental protection has come to mean preserving the delicate mechanisms of air, ocean, water, and land that make life possible on earth.

Today, however, environmentalism calls no longer exclude human population dynamics, for it is inescapably people - and our habits - that will determine whether what we try to protect can actually be saved. While we may admire and revere the exquisite miracle of reproduction, we would be fools if we allowed our reverence to erode our responsibility to bring children into a world suited to receive them, sustain them and help them prosper.

Unlike the young invertebrate squid, our offspring should not be left to fend for themselves. To ignore the links between population and environment is to do just that.

(Jean-Michel Cousteau's commentary is distributed by the Los Angeles Times Syndicate.)