

The Neglected Threat of Overpopulation

By WILLIAM B. DICKINSON

Climate change, global warming — call it what you will — forces us to deal with the consequences of another threat to humankind: overpopulation. If today's 7.1 billion people have already dangerously overloaded our atmosphere with greenhouse gases, what can we expect when world population tops 9 billion by mid-century? This is an existential question the climate denial folks don't want to answer, and, to their relief, it is one rarely asked.

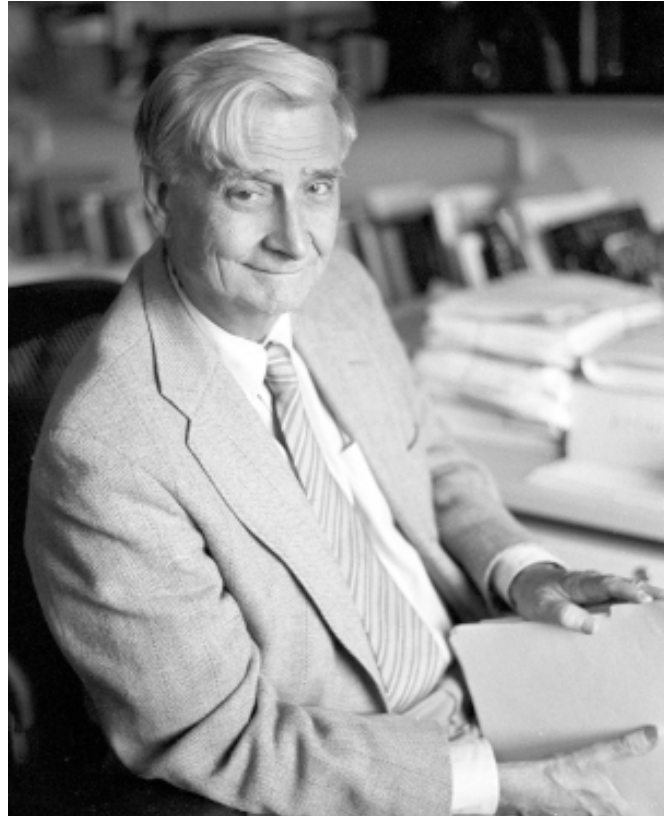
Of course, if you believe that climate change is merely a cyclical phenomenon not heavily influenced by human activity, then population growth becomes immaterial. The more people the merrier. An expanding world population means more consumers of stuff, hence greater prosperity for all. Carbon emission regulations become not only unnecessary but hamper economic growth. Or so that way of thinking goes.

Once you have discounted humans' role in climate change, all the empirical observations and scientific studies to the contrary become irrelevant. Arctic melt, rising sea levels, record global temperatures, widespread drought — perhaps the trends will reverse next year or soon, and impetus for action will evaporate. One can always hope. Meantime, frame the climate threat as one driven by environmental ideologues rather than by good science. So far, this has been a winning formula.

"The more we learn about the biosphere, the more complex and beautiful it turns out to be," wrote biologist/philosopher E.O. Wilson (*The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*, 2006). "Earth, and especially the razor-thin film of life enveloping it, is our home, our well-spring, our physical and much of our spiritual sustenance." Earth's atmosphere is part of that razor-thin film that allows life on our planet. But techno-optimists

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treat it as a self-renewing resource that can be compromised without permanent consequences.



Distinguished scholar and author Edward O. Wilson

The scientific consensus says otherwise. Nearly five years ago, the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* briefly captured public attention when a new threat caused it to move the minute hand of its Doomsday Clock from seven minutes to midnight to five minutes to midnight. "We have concluded that the dangers posed by climate change are nearly as dire as those posed by nuclear weapons," the *Bulletin's* board of directors said. "The effects may be less dramatic in the short term than the destruction that could be wrought by nuclear explosions, but over the next three or four decades climate change could cause drastic harm to the habitats upon which human societies depend for survival."

It's taken much less than several decades for the warning to come true. Extreme heat and drought hit a number of major crop exporters this summer, including

the United States, Russia, Ukraine, and Brazil. Food prices escalated, putting pressure on vulnerable populations in poor countries. The shortfalls caused directors of three UN food and agriculture programs to sound an alarm about the “long-term issue of how we produce, trade and consume food in an age of increasing population....” In August, the American Meteorological Society stated that climate change is real, and is caused by human activity, and that avoiding future warming “will require a large and rapid reduction in global greenhouse gas emission.” (Go to www.climate.gov to monitor changing carbon dioxide levels, shrinking Arctic ice and glaciers.)

No one suggests that humans will heat the Earth to such a degree that oceans will boil away. Rather, it is the slow but discernible erosion of confidence as weather dramas impinge on everyday well-being.

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As world population increases and fosters more carbon emissions, we can expect more unpleasant surprises in our weather. Donald Mann, president of Negative Population Growth, points out that population growth is a major contributing factor in climate change. Consider this astonishing fact: In little more than 200 years, world population has grown from about 1 billion to today’s 7.1 billion. If you are 40 years old, there are 2 billion more people today than there were the day you were born. In the United States, population of 313 million today is projected to reach well in excess of 400 million by mid-century. Worldwide Institute, a non-

profit environmental think-tank, puts the matter in stark terms: “If we cannot stabilize climate and we cannot stabilize population, there is not an ecosystem on Earth that we can save.”

Will the elections last November clarify or further confuse public policy on greenhouse gases? Unfortunately, the ideological divide makes compromise difficult. Alternative energy sources to replace fossil fuels will require large public and private investment. Pressure should be put on developing nations to moderate their reliance on coal and oil, while acknowledging our own nation’s heavy contribution to atmospheric pollution.

Family planning deserves top spot in the international development agenda. The developing countries of Africa, Asia, and Latin America account for 97 percent of world population growth, fueled by the dual effects of high birth rates and the momentum provided by their young. One example of a nightmare scenario: Tanzania’s present population of 48 million is projected to reach 138 million by 2050. In Niger, the average number of children per woman stands at 7.1. One study estimates that a dollar spent on family planning will yield five times the reduction of global greenhouse gases that can be achieved by technology alone.

René Dubos, an eloquent ethicist and medical researcher, in 1968 warned that continued growth of technological civilization, “indeed its very survival, requires an enlargement of our understanding of man’s nature.” Global warming is the latest evidence that we have yet to reconcile our primal drive for procreation with the limits imposed by a finite planet. ■