

Overpopulation and Hunger

Unsustainable Growth, Food Shortages Underscore the Need to Live Within Limits

By WILLIAM B. DICKINSON

The world is a hungry place. Creatures of the air, land, and sea with all kinds of appetites compete for limited calories and nutrients that sustain their lives. Included in this voracious mix are seven billion humans armed with ingenuity and technology that have enabled them, in most years, and in most societies, to survive and add to the species. Some 219,000 people will be seeking a meal today who were not here yesterday.

Those of us lucky enough to live in rich nations often take the availability of reasonably priced food for granted. To some extent, this is an illusion. We forget that 44.6 million Americans use food stamps, at a cost this year of \$71.5 billion. In poor nations, food security becomes a daily preoccupation. Shortages combined with rising prices force many families to spend 40 or even 50 percent of their income just to put food on the table.

A report from Oxfam, the British charity organization, recently estimated that 925 million people go hungry every day. “We have entered an age of growing crisis,” Oxfam said, “of shock piled upon shock: vertiginous food price spikes and oil price hikes, devastating weather events, financial meltdowns and global contagion.” The report warned that food prices could double in the next 20 years, with food demand 70 percent higher than today. The World Bank estimates that rising food prices pushed 44 million people into poverty in the latter half of 2010.

Fear mounts that the world is just one poor harvest away from crisis. The problem dominated a June meeting of agriculture ministers from the Group of 20 leading

economies. Export restrictions on food for humanitarian purposes were removed. The ministers also agreed to set up a “rapid response forum” among the Group of 20 members to deal with emerging food shortages.

* * * * *

Jumps in food prices sparked the Egyptian and Tunisian uprisings, and the lesson has not been lost on other vulnerable nations. In China, food budgets account for 30 to 40 percent of household spending. Unlike other food-deficit nations, China has the financial clout to anticipate the problem and shore up its food reserves, driving up world commodity prices in the process. From March until July, China is believed to have purchased 1.7 million metric tons of U.S. corn, helping drive corn futures upward. U.S. corn inventories are projected to reach a 15-year low before this fall’s harvest. China is believed to be continuing its buildup, seizing on a better-than-expected corn forecast that dropped futures from a record \$8 a bushel to almost \$6.

What’s astonishing is the extent to which the food needs of one nation — China — can roil markets. In a column written for *Barron’s* weekly (June 27), commodities trader Michael Martin said that China’s “inelastic demand” for hog feed appeared to be the driving force behind high commodities prices. Hog feed is an 80/20 blend of corn and soybean meal. China has 446 million hogs and consumes 50 percent of the world’s pork supply each year. It takes four pounds of hog feed to produce one pound of pork. And China imports 80 percent of its soybean needs, with 98 percent used for hog feed. “Heavy demand and constrained supply could lift soybean prices to \$20 a bushel in 12 to 18 months, from around \$13.20 now,” he wrote.

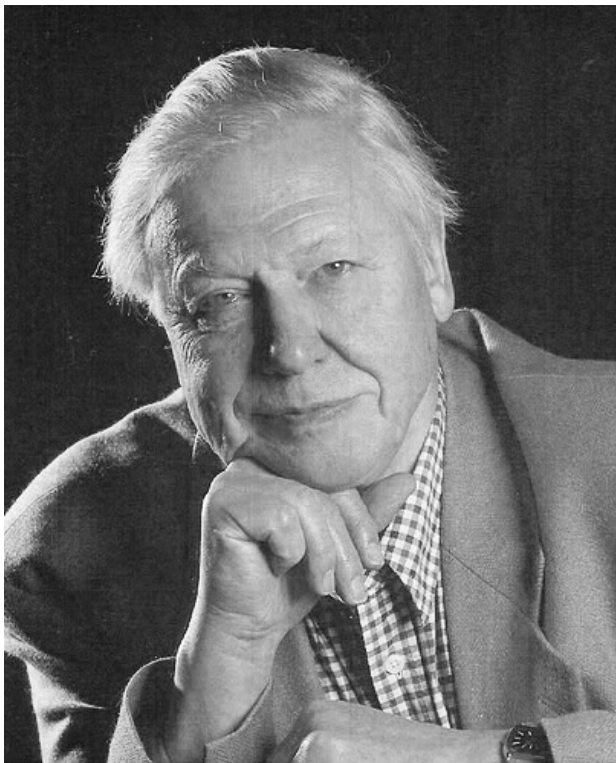
If China is unable to meet sharply rising food demand from its domestic resources, imagine the plight of less financially well-endowed nations. Egypt imports more than half of its wheat from abroad. To subsidize bread, the government there doles out \$2 billion a year to the 60 percent of Egyptian families that depend on the subsidy. The ability to put bread or rice on family tables

William B. Dickinson served for two decades as editorial director of the Washington Post Writers Group, and is a Distinguished Professor of Journalism and Mass Communication at Louisiana State University. He continues to be associated with the Biocentric Institute at Warrenton, Va., for which this essay was written. www.cliftoninstitute.org.

may determine the fate of many shaky governments in coming years.

What’s to be done? Optimists cite new crop and farming technologies as the key to giving the whole of mankind enough to eat. In an editorial accompanying a special report on feeding the world, *The Economist* (Feb. 26) acknowledged the strains on food supplies such as climate change and geopolitical conflicts, but concluded:

When all is said and done, the world is at the start of a new agricultural revolution that could for the first time ever feed all mankind adequately. The genomes of most major crops have been sequenced and the benefits are starting to appear.



Naturalist David Attenborough

Projected increases in world population from today’s seven billion to more than nine billion in 2050 don’t worry *The Economist’s* editors. It should be “perfectly possible” to feed those additional people, and, be-

sides, by that time “the growth in the world’s population will have slowed almost to zero,” they predict. Many demographers are less sanguine about an end to population growth in this century. The medium projection issued by the United Nations in 2010 is for a world population of 10.1 billion in 2100. Its high projection would lead to a global population of 15.8 billion at the turn of the century.

Even that eternal eco-optimist, Thomas L. Friedman, has weighed in on behalf of a sustainable population. In a *New York Times* column headlined “The Earth Is Full,” (June 8, 2011), Friedman looked back at the first decade of the 21st century, one marked by soaring food and energy prices, world population surge, flood and droughts, displaced populations, and threatened governments. “What were we thinking?” Friedman wrote. “How did we not panic when the evidence was so obvious that we’d crossed some growth/climate/natural resources/population redlines all at once?”

Everyone should read the eloquent talk on planet and population delivered in March by Sir David Attenborough, the naturalist, to the Royal Society of Arts and Commerce. He called attention to the fact that a British government report on the future of food and farming showed how hard it is to feed the seven billion people who are alive today.

But surprisingly it doesn’t state the obvious fact that it would be much easier to feed eight billion people than ten. ...It doesn’t refer to the prescient statement 40 years ago by Norman Borlaug, the Nobel Laureate and father of the first Green Revolution...that all he had done was to give us a ‘breathing space’ in which to stabilize our numbers....There seems to be some bizarre taboo around the subject.

(www.thersa.org/events/audio-and-past-events/2011/rsa-presidents-lecture-2011)

The strange silence on overpopulation is slowly being broken as we become aware that living within limits must become the new normal. The Earth is finite. Our environmental and social problems become difficult if not impossible to solve as we cope with ever more people. Food scarcity tells us more about our stewardship of the planet than we may want to hear. ■