

Caring for Our Mother Earth

A Timely Documentary That Confronts the Taboo of Overpopulation

BY FRED ELBEL

At the time of the first Earth Day in 1970, population was an integral aspect of any intelligent discussion on sustainability. Today, population is often erroneously viewed as an issue which has been resolved. Worse, it has become the subject of a 40-year taboo.

Mother: Caring for 7 Billion

By Filmmakers Joyce Johnson and Christophe Fauchere
Tiroir A Films, 2011
www.MotherTheFilm.com

Winner: Best Film, Population Institute 32nd Annual Media Awards
Winner: Best Social-Issue Doc, 2011 DocuFest Atlanta
Winner: Best Colorado Film, Boulder International Film Festival, 2011
Official Selection: American Conservation Film Festival, 2011
Official Selection: Kansas International Film Festival, 2011
Official Selection: La Femme Film Festival, 2011
Official Selection: Planete Doc Film Festival, 2012

Mother: Caring for 7 Billion directly confronts the taboo on this crucial issue. *Mother* is a movie about Mother Earth and the seven billion people she is now required to sustain. The movie conveys the message of hope which is counterbalanced by the reality of increasing population numbers and diminishing resources. The full-length documentary, filmed in the United States and Ethiopia, brings an international yet personal focus to the population versus sustainability issue. It features the following world-renowned experts, in order of appearance:

Dr. Malcolm Potts — University of California at Berkeley
John Feeney — Environmental writer
Rev. Peter Sawtell — Eco Justice Ministries
Dr. Paul Ehrlich — Stanford University
William Ryerson — Population Media Center

Fred Elbel is an Internet marketing consultant and web designer and is spokesperson and former director of Colorado Alliance for Immigration Reform.
www.cairco.org.

Dr. Mathis Wackernagel — Global Footprint Network

Dr. Lyuba Zarsky — Monterey Institute of International Studies

Dr. Lester Brown — Earth Policy Institute

Esraa Bani — Population Action International

Dr. Albert Bartlett — University of Colorado

Robert Walker — Population Institute

Beth Osnes — Mothers Acting Up

Brian Dixon — Population Connection

Dr. Martha Campbell — Venture Strategies

Dr. Negussie Teffera — Population Media Center

Zinet Mohammed

Katie Elmore — Population Media Center

Laura Scott — Author, *Two Is Enough*

Riane Eisler — Center for Partnership Studies

Dr. Aminata Toure — United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)

Susan Davis — BRAC, USA



The Overpopulation Problem

The first two minutes of the film seize one's attention with high-impact graphics depicting world population growth. World population reached one billion by 1804 and has grown dramatically ever since. The movie submits that "every year there are about 78 million more people living on the planet — that's about 220,000 people every day competing for both natural resources and economic opportunity — stretching further the capacity of the world to sustain us."

Rapid population growth has been an unintended consequence of improved health care and the green agricultural revolution. The movie notes that "by adding fossil fuels to our agriculture, we have allowed population to simply skyrocket." As a result, we saddled Mother Earth with six billion people by 1999 and twelve years later, on Halloween, 2011, we reached a frightening seven billion. Indeed, population is projected to reach a truly scary nine billion by 2045.

The issue of population first gained prominent attention in the late 1960s. It was an integral theme of the first Earth Day in 1970. As movie fast forwards to the most recent Earth Day, it notes that population is now hardly mentioned at all. Today, contraceptives are freely available and the *rate* of population growth has decreased (although numbers are still increasing). Because of the lack of discussion of the issue, people now generally believe the problem has been largely solved. The movie cautions that “if we now assume the problem is solved and fail to pay adequate attention to it, we are going to see all of that work undermined.”

A key concept which many people do not understand is population momentum, which means that when fertility (children per woman) is changed, it takes a full generation (approximately 73 years in the U.S.) for a change in population numbers to be realized. The movie explains that even if everyone decided to have no more than two children today, world population would still increase to eight billion — which means that we will have to feed at least that many people in coming years.

Overpopulation is of paramount importance to the issue of sustainability. Since the first Earth Day, there has been a five-fold increase in recycling, yet there is now 47 percent more trash in landfills, and CO2 emissions have increased by 20 percent. Our planet is currently undergoing the sixth great extinction — 150 to 200 species go extinct every 24 hours.

Dr. Mathis Wackernagel, economist and creator of the Ecological Footprint, notes that people have expandable consumption patterns which have no natural limits, and admonishes that “our demand is larger than what nature can regenerate... Adding 50 million to the middle class each year is a ticking time bomb for our civilization.”

Lester Brown observes that the demand for food is driven by three forces:

1. population growth;
2. rising affluence with two to three billion people trying to move up the food chain, consuming more grain-intensive lifestyle products;
3. the conversion of grain into fuel for cars — the grain required to fill a 25 gallon SUV tank would feed one person for a year.

William Ryerson notes that, although in 1972 Norman Borlaug won the Nobel Peace Prize as the father of the green revolution, “he saw the green revolution as a way of buying maybe 30 years to solve the population problem. And the fact that we’re peaking in oil produc-

tion almost everywhere [means that] the availability of food globally is going to plummet.”

Water is already a pressing issue, while land has become the new gold — Oxfam America reports that “560 million acres, the size of Greenland, have been sold, leased or licensed since 2001 in developing countries.”

A journey to Ethiopia

In order to present a more personalized account of the population issue, the movie introduces Beth Osnes, a woman from Colorado who encourages mothers to see themselves as advocates for the world’s children. Her parents did not practice birth control and as a result had ten children. Wanting a larger family, she decided to adopt a third child from Africa.

The film follows Osnes on a journey to Ethiopia — a country which contrasts markedly with the United States. Rapid population growth there has driven its people into abject poverty; Ethiopia’s population is projected to triple from 91 million to 278 million by 2050.

Osnes finds that women in Ethiopia are stuck in societal roles which force high fertility, and she concludes that human rights-based solutions are integral to achieving population stabilization.

Education is one such factor in the population equation — a girl who is educated will marry later and more of her children will survive and be healthier. To emphasize that point, the movie continues with the story of Zinet, the oldest daughter of a family of 12 who lives in poverty in central Ethiopia. She refused to marry at an early age and instead went to school, thus helping to break the cycle of poverty by avoiding early pregnancy.

The invisible barriers

While U.S. teenagers have the highest birth rate in the developed world, Laura Scott, author of *Two is Enough*, remarks that the medical community will resist anyone wishing permanent sterilization.

Scott notes that 215 million women worldwide who wish to have smaller families don’t use family planning because of informational and cultural barriers. Should these barriers be eliminated, the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) estimates that family planning would decrease family growth by a substantial 28 percent.

Sadly, in many countries women are viewed simply as “technologies of reproduction.” “Changing man’s mind about the humanity of women is critically important,” says Ryerson.

Ryerson’s Population Media Center and Population Institute challenges these cultural barriers in a novel

yet effective manner, using entertainment to deliver the overpopulation message in less-developed countries. They sponsor soap operas with characters — particularly women — who evolve into reproductive role models. Their “radio dramas” have helped prevent AIDS and have increased the demand for contraceptives by a remarkable 157 percent.

The perceived threat of declining population

More coercive approaches to fertility reduction have also been successful. China’s forced sterilization and one-child policy resulted in its rate of population growth being cut in half over the last 50 years — a significant and notable achievement. In many other countries, population growth rates are declining, albeit not coercively. Although population momentum will continue to keep population numbers high for a generation, the movie observes that “the developed world — primarily Europe and Japan — have seen their [declining] numbers and their aging population as a threat to their prosperity.”

While changing demographics will certainly impact many nations, physical population growth can not continue indefinitely on a physical — and fragile — planet. Mathis Wackernagel observes that U.S. population is increasing at 2.7 million per year, and that if everyone lived at the U.S. standard of living, it would take *six* planet earths to provide the resources we would consume.

Ryserson reflects on the instability of unending population growth, noting that “in many countries, they are paying people what I call bribes to have babies, thinking that if they get their birth rate up, they will have ever more working adults to support the aged population. Having babies on top of an aged population that is relatively healthy and can work much longer years than standard retirement age — that was set during the time of Bismarck — is a crazy way to solve that problem.”

As Lyuba Zarsky points out, “we have created an ideology out of growth that has taken over our economic planning and development.” Prof. Al Bartlett adds that:

Developers like to hide the fact that growth never pays for itself. Your taxes have to go up to pay for the cost of growth. If the growth were paying for itself, there would be more

money in the bank to pay for a downturn in the economy — but that hasn’t happened. What we have, then, is essentially a Ponzi scheme in which you have people contributing every year which goes to the benefit of the few people but...taxes have to go up for everybody.

Bartlett concludes that in the United States, “we’ve got to set an example and stop our own population growth if we’re going to have any moral basis for lecturing to

people in other countries when we say ‘you’ve got to stop your population growth.’” Paul Ehrlich more succinctly quips that “until you’re taking care of the people we have now, stop giving me this crap about how easy it will be to support more and more people.”

The real wealth of a nation consists of the contributions and well-being of its people. We desperately need economic policies which give priority to caring for people. In one particular example, Riane Eisler points out that Norway has invested in a caring economic system that has resulted in a family-friendly, yet stable, population.



Our legacy

What is really the kind of world we want for our children?

Mother cautions that “more than half of the world population — the majority in the developing world — is under the age of 28 and is either at — or will be at — reproductive age in the next few years. Depending on the kind of choices these youth will make, humanity, according to UN projections, could be as low as 8 billion or as high as 10.5 billion by 2050 — a variance that could make all the difference as we are beginning to reach many thresholds of the planet.”

The story of our last 10,000 years has been the story of domination — over each other and over nature. Change can bring about a new attitude toward sustainability, and this movie is one instrument attempting to achieve such change. *Mother* states that “we are one human family connected in our challenges...and connected in our solutions.”

Mother is a substantive movie suitable for any general audience. Indeed, it should be mandatory viewing for high school students, their parents, and, of course, policy makers. ■