

MY WAY OF THINKING

MARK CARWARDINE

The conservationist discusses population forecasts and invites your thoughts on the subject.

How many more people can we squeeze onto our fragile planet? Surely, the Earth must be full? Pretending that human numbers can grow forever, with no ill-effects, is at best naïve and at worst utterly irresponsible.

Biodiversity loss, climate change, pollution, deforestation, water and food shortages – these are all exacerbated by our huge and ever-increasing numbers. Yet governments – and most environmental groups – choose to sidestep this mammoth-sized elephant in the room.

The human population was just 2.6 billion in 1950. But it has trebled to a staggering 7.7 billion today and without radical action, according to the UN, will reach 9.7 billion by 2050 and 11.2 billion by the end of the century. Where will so many people live? How will we feed them?

It wouldn't be an exaggeration to suggest that, unless we diffuse this 'population bomb', by the end of the century we will need several Earths to survive. But we can't have several Earths, and so we will face a future of increasing poverty, food shortages, conflict and environmental degradation.

Admittedly, not everyone agrees with the UN's predictions. It's not a precise science, after all. But even the doubters calculate that the human population will grow to 8 or 9 billion sometime between 2040 and 2060 (and then, they say, it will begin to decline).

In a way, it's all just semantics. There is no denying that the planet is already buckling under the pressure of 7.7 billion people. And, ultimately, there has to be a limit.

The good news is that the human

populations of about two dozen countries, from Poland and Italy to Cuba and Japan, are now decreasing. Japan's population declined by more than 430,000 in 2018 alone. (Incidentally, the UK population would also be declining – our fertility rate was 1.7 children per woman in 2018 – if it weren't for international immigration.)

But that's not true of most countries. The cradle of overpopulation is in Africa, which is where more than half of global population growth is expected to occur: from 1.3 billion people across the continent in 2020 to 4.3 billion in 2100.

The solution isn't rocket science. There are two drivers of population growth: birth rates and longevity. We can't help that we are living longer (we all aim to grow old, after all) but we can reduce birth rates. That's not to say than anyone should be denied

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the right to have as many children as they like. But it's a fact that wherever women are empowered and literated, have help with family planning and have access to medical care, they generally choose to have fewer children. And the birth rate falls.

So why the stony silence? Why such a failure of leadership from governments and environmental groups? I think it's for two reasons. First, calls for population control are often deemed racist: relatively rich people in the developed world blaming poor people in the developing world.

Second, it is often deemed hypocritical. The problem is as much about consumerism as it is about population growth: we westerners are consuming more and more, so it appears as if we are blaming the poor for the excesses of the rich. Most population growth is, indeed, taking place among those who consume almost nothing (although that is changing as many of the world's developing countries improve the living standards of their citizens). But the uncomfortable truth is that we all need to consume much less.

Whatever the complications, we urgently need a UN Framework Convention on Population, just as we have for climate change. As David Attenborough told *Radio Times* in 2013: “Either we limit our population growth or the natural world will do it for us”. 🐘

MARK CARWARDINE is a frustrated and frank conservationist.

WHAT DO YOU THINK? If you want to support Mark in his views or shoot him down in flames, email wildlifeletters@immediate.co.uk



Nairobi National Park is located about 7km from the centre of Kenya's capital city.