

Overpopulation: The Real Crisis

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We have made a real mess on this planet. People are finally awakening to some of the many consequences of overpopulation, such as global warming and peak oil. Everybody expects technology to come to our rescue, but technology is what got us into this precarious position in the first place. Technology only leads us out onto thin ice. Humans are not exempt from the laws of nature. Everyone wants unlimited cheap clean energy, but they fail to recognize that global warming is occurring precisely because the earth can no longer dissipate excess waste heat. More energy consumption will exacerbate and accelerate warming, which will destroy our spaceship's life support systems. All our problems stem from three underlying causes: economic systems based on perpetual growth, runaway greed and - most importantly - too many people on our planet. Earth simply cannot support all 6.8+ billion of us, at least not in American lifestyles.

Where did we go wrong? Until about 10,000 years ago, humans lived off the land in harmony with nature. The earth could support our much smaller population of hunter-gatherers, who harvested natural resources and lived in equilibrium with other plants and animals. All that changed when we made our first big mistake and invented agriculture. Agriculture allowed us to produce more food, which in turn generated more people. Humans became much more sedentary and built cities. Urbanites lost touch with nature. We began deforestation in earnest, clearing natural habitats to make more land for agriculture. We invented money and economic systems based on continual growth. These, in turn, facilitated greed: wealthy people could now control the less fortunate. As the rich got richer, political and legal systems became necessary. Every time food supplies ran out, humans expanded to new lands. Then came the industrial revolution and the burning of fossil fuels. We began high-grading Earth's bountiful resources, all the while expanding our population. The saying "Go west, young man, go west!" worked until eventually west met east and we encircled the entire planet. We thought (and some still do) that we could go on increasing indefinitely. But we have hit limits.

Now, soils are eroding ten to hundreds of times faster than they develop, oceans are warming and acidifying, coral reefs are dying, biodiversity is imploding, natural gas and petroleum are being depleted, atmospheric carbon dioxide levels are a third higher than in pre-industrial times and climate is going into convulsions, as indicated by more ferocious

storms. All these phenomena are symptoms with one fundamental underlying cause: too many people. If we continue to go on with this steadfast refusal to recognize limits in a finite world, it will be our undoing. Current global economic systems based on perpetual expansion of capital require population growth to increase markets and cheap labor. Coupling such growth-crazed economic systems with human greed will ultimately result in the collapse of civilization.

We want a world with health care, shelter, food and water for all, but such an egalitarian world cannot support as many people as currently exist on our planet. Unless we reduce our population, resource scarcity will accomplish the decrease in human numbers and painfully so, via plagues and famines.

Just as the pharmaceutical industry targets symptomatic relief for man-made ailments rather than addressing underlying root causes, widespread attention to the many spin-offs from growthmania and overpopulation diverts attention away from the underlying causative problems.

Humanity has a fatal disease - its symptoms include runaway greed, our insane economic system, starvation, peak oil, global warming, selfish corporations and ineffective government. Humans are rapidly destroying our one and only spaceship's life support systems: Earth's atmosphere and oceans, commons we all must share, are threatened, perhaps irreparably. Faith in rapture and/or technology will not save us from human nature. If humans are to survive, we must confront reality and find ways to control [human instincts](#), including our greed and our innate urge to procreate.

Last semester I taught a freshman seminar course on the human overpopulation crisis. For it, I assembled a Web site (<http://www.zo.utexas.edu/courses/THOC/>), with many links and articles, including essays on [agriculture](#), [money](#), [energy](#), [economics](#), [climate change](#), [natural selection](#), [human instincts](#), [evolution of uncaring humanoids](#) and much more. We studied population issues and read dozens of papers on a wide variety of subjects (watch our [video](#)). We concluded that most people are in a state of denial about overpopulation, unwilling or unable to confront reality. There's an ancient Chinese curse - "May you live in interesting times." We've lucked out, for right now is undoubtedly among the most interesting times in the entire history of humanity.