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Media release

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Pope's encyclical misses the main game: overpopulation

The release of the Pope's encyclical "Praised Be" is very welcome because it recognises the clear and present danger to the earth's life-support systems, especially through anthropogenic climate change. But environment NGO, Sustainable Population Australia (SPA), says the encyclical misses a major part of the problem – the human population explosion.

SPA national president, Sandra Kanck, says the Catholic Church has a long history of ignoring the harm of its prohibition on contraception, preferring the comfort of its theological arguments over the environmental destruction being caused by overpopulation.

"Sensible Catholics, especially in developed nations, largely ignore the Vatican's outdated attitude to contraception. But recognition from the Vatican that women should have control over how many children they have would be a big step forward, not just for those women and their children but for the environment.

"If Pope Francis is serious about addressing the overexploitation of planetary resources, then he must recognise the link between human numbers and environmental destruction. The rates of growth of both consumption and population are equivalent and tackling one without tackling the other is like fighting a dangerous foe with one hand tied behind one's back.

"Yes, the Pope is right about the unequal distribution of food and other resources but the reality is that, if world population was only one-third of its current level of more than 7.3 billion, he might not have been in the position of having to release his statement.

"Even if the rich third of the world disappeared entirely and the remaining poorer two thirds were able to reduce their poverty by doubling their resource consumption, such are their numbers that the climate change problem would not be solved. Numbers as well as consumption do matter.

"Pope Francis says people must adjust their consumption of resources and production of waste, yet even if these were brought under control – highly unlikely given recent trends – world population could hit 9.6 billion by 2050 and 11 billion by 2100.

"In these predicted circumstances even assuming that all the issues of exploitation could be overcome, any gains would be lost with an extra 3.5 billion people taking up their meagre share of the remaining resources.

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About Sustainable Population Australia: SPA is an independent not-for-profit organisation formed in 1988 to promote an understanding of the effects of human population numbers on the biosphere and society.