

DISCUSSION PAPER

How many Australians?

The need for Earth-centric ethics

Paul Collins

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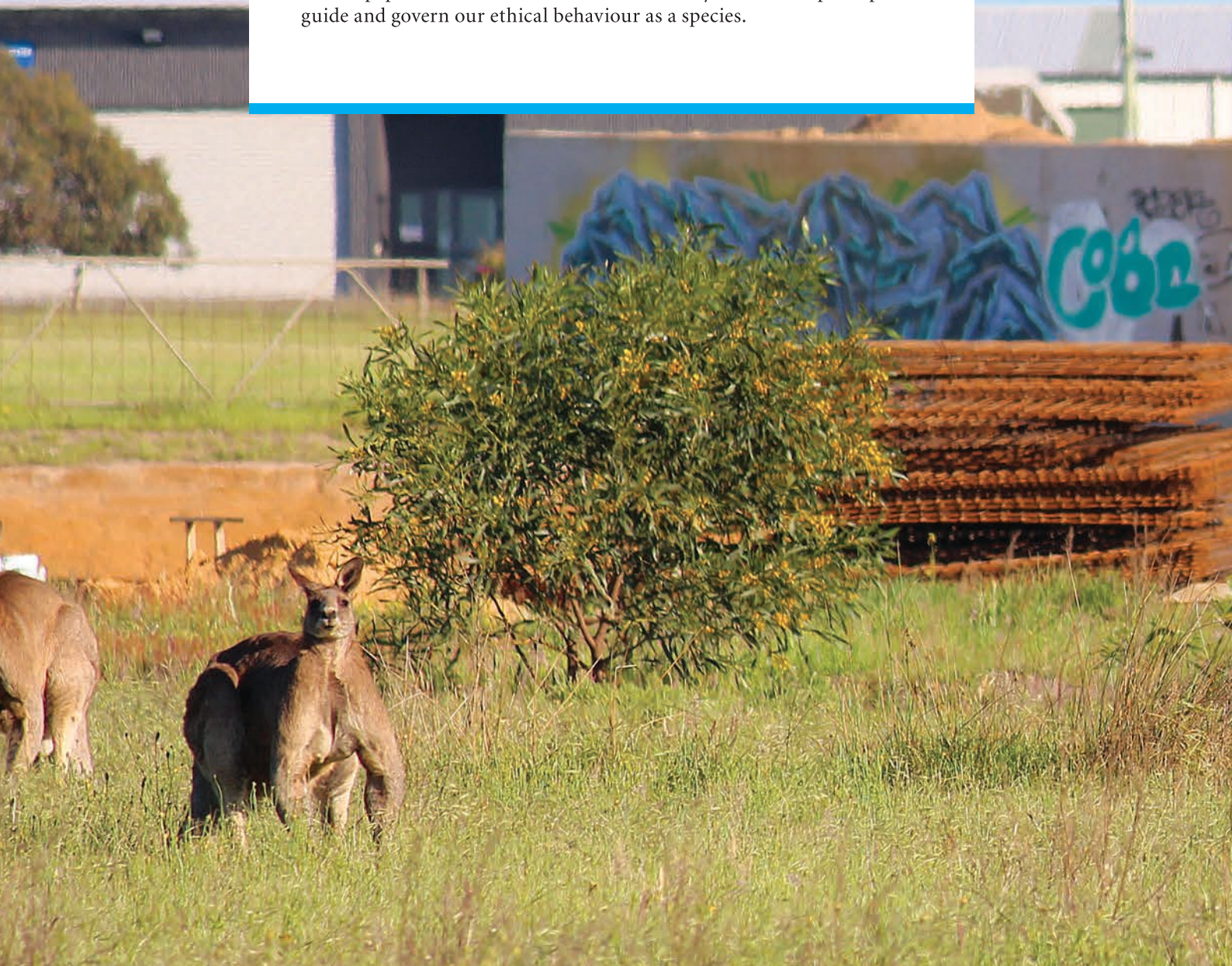
The need for Earth-centric ethics

Australia is a big country. Surely, we should allow the world's 'tired, poor, huddled masses' to settle here? And yet, despite its physical size, Australia is limited in biophysical and geophysical terms. All our *State of Environment* reports have found the demands of the current population have been degrading natural systems irreversibly. We are not living sustainably with the numbers we have at current standards of living.

And yet, the world is clamouring at our doors. Millions want to come and share the riches we enjoy. Do we have a moral duty to let them come and allow them a better life? Or should we protect the ecosystems in our care, not least the habitat of our iconic koala that is currently threatened by urban expansion and deforestation?

Immigration has made up the bulk of Australian population growth for the past quarter century. This critical discussion paper on the ethics of immigration addresses the competing demands of human beings seeking a better life, with the rights of our natural systems to prevail against the demands of human activities.

In this paper, Dr Paul Collins calls for a totally new moral principle to guide and govern our ethical behaviour as a species.



Sustainable Population Australia Inc.

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The need for Earth-centric ethics

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For a decade from 1986 Collins presented programs on ABC TV including *Compass* and, on ABC Radio, *The Religion Report*, *Insights* and *Sunday Night Talk*. From 1992 to 1996 he was the head of the ABC Religion and Ethics department. He often appears on ABC and commercial media commenting on religious and population issues.

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Foreword

How many Australians? Sometime in 2022, our population ticked over to 26 million. Many consider this is not nearly enough given our island continent is vast in size. Surely, we can accommodate millions more? That view, however, ignores biological and geophysical reality. Yes, the country is large, but mostly arid with a variable climate and poor soils. And every one of the five-yearly *State of the Environment* reports since 1996 have found the demands of the present population are degrading our natural systems irreversibly. Clearly, we are not living sustainably with the numbers we have at current standards of living.

Nevertheless, many note that our standard of living is excessive compared to that of billions living in the developing world. They argue that we have a moral duty to share our relative wealth by allowing the ‘tired, poor, huddled masses’ to settle here. Others say we must stabilise our numbers – even reduce them – in order to preserve the habitats of other species including those of the iconic koala. They say there is a moral duty to care for our natural ecosystems on which our economy ultimately depends.

This crucial debate is the subject of this discussion paper commissioned by Sustainable Population Australia (SPA). Who better to write it than our Patron since 2000: broadcaster, historian, author of 17 books, and former priest, Dr Paul Collins? In his seminal 1995 book *God’s Earth*, Dr Collins explored the religious and philosophical roots of the environmental crisis. In that book, he addressed modern humanity’s estrangement from the physical environment, resulting in the destructive exploitation of our planet.

In this discussion paper, he calls for a totally new moral principle to guide and govern our ethical behaviour as a species. He argues that we must shift our ethics away from anthropocentrism and economism which pays no heed to our dependence on the natural world. Instead, moral decision-making must give priority to the Earth, biodiversity, climate stability and the integrity of natural systems.

This is a fundamental moral shift and there are difficult consequences. Nevertheless, we must confront them. This discussion paper does just that.

Jenny Goldie
National President
Sustainable Population Australia

Summary

The world is already facing several threats including global warming, biodiversity loss, resource depletion and global inequality. A key underpinning factor is overpopulation. Further growth could lead to the collapse of natural systems, threatening not just humans but thousands of other species. Indeed, many countries with high fertility rates, such as Niger, face imminent collapse should their populations double again by mid-century.

Australia is a vast country but with limited carrying capacity because it is largely arid, its soils poor and climate variable. In this discussion paper, Dr Paul Collins discusses the history of population growth in this country and the ecological constraints on further growth. He then addresses the ethics of immigration which is the major contributor to population growth in Australia.

In determining the ethics of immigration, Dr Collins distinguishes between anthropocentrism and the Earth-centric principle. He believes humanity must be placed firmly in an Earth-centric context. In applying the moral principle of Earth-first, however, tough decisions must be made. He concludes that what we must do is limit Australia's immigration program, but giving priority to UN-certified refugees, particularly people from Pacific Island nations.

1. Introduction

“Catastrophist” is one of those words which has gained some traction in recent English usage. It often functions as a weapon to trivialise those who warn that we face a disastrous situation with the impact of global warming, biodiversity loss, resource depletion, global inequality and an affluence posited on an imagined infinity of resources in a finite world. A key factor underpinning these threats is overpopulation, which could eventually lead to the partial or complete collapse of natural systems, profoundly threatening human life and culture, let alone thousands of other species. In fact, there are already countries like West Africa’s Niger, with a fertility rate of 6.95 children per woman and an expected doubling of the population by 2050, that are facing collapse from overpopulation.

Most thoughtful people recognise that human numbers are a problem, but Australians tend to dismiss it because it doesn’t immediately impact on us. It’s seen as someone else’s challenge. Many also conclude, either consciously or unconsciously, that overpopulation is an insoluble moral problem revolving around personal or spousal rights regarding reproduction. In an individualistic world-view, this is a decision in which the community plays no part.

The discussion of overpopulation lost much of its respectability from the 1980s onwards, following the forced sterilisation policies of India in the 1970s, and the one-child policy in China which began in 1980 and which was lifted to a three-child policy in May 2021. These forced measures were regrettable and proved to be unnecessary, since the countries which most rapidly cut their birth rates—from Thailand to Iran and Costa Rica—did so using only voluntary measures. Most of China’s fertility reduction happened under a voluntary program in the 1970s before the one-child policy was implemented. The forced sterilisations in China and India only served to give family planning a bad name.

There is also a link between population and people’s rights to mobility as they attempt to emigrate from situations of political and religious oppression, racial exclusion, civil strife, economic deprivation and environmental collapse, most seeking to relocate to developed Western countries. A percentage of these people are subsequently recognised as refugees. This can sometimes lead to a toxic debate centring on the right of nation states to control their borders and to exclude arrivals. This has certainly been the case in Australia.

This paper argues that overpopulation is an underlying but central factor in the ecological crisis confronting us. Sure, unsustainable lifestyles and overuse of resources in the developed world are important contributing factors, but human numbers are already far in excess of sustainability and, while gradually slowing down, they are still predicted to keep increasing in coming decades.

Attempts to discuss the population problem in Australia is, unfortunately, often characterised by accusations of racism, xenophobia and economic ignorance. Such accusations are usually directed at anyone who suggests that Australia also needs to think seriously about its own population growth, which is largely driven by immigration rather than natural increase. Our vast landmass and resources lead to suggestions that the continent is *under*-populated, even though it

has already lost to extinction more than 100 species in the last 240 years, including one in eight land mammals, while our human population has gone from less than a million before European settlement to roughly 26 million in mid-2022.¹

Currently, 91 species are listed as critically endangered and 179 endangered.² The causes of extinction are well-known: widespread forest clearing, land degradation due to erosion and overstocking, introduced feral species, a massive expansion in the regularity and extent of fire in the landscape and increasingly the impact of global warming. All of these issues are related to increasing population.

Taken together, these issues highlight the importance of widespread public discussion in Australia of immigration levels and natality, while avoiding the implied or overt accusation of racist xenophobia.

What in fact we need, both globally and in Australia, is a totally new moral principle to guide and govern our ethical behaviour as a species. This principle will focus on the priority of the Earth, biodiversity, climate stability and the integrity of natural systems as the primary focus of moral decision-making, shifting ethics away from an anthropocentrism and economism that totally prioritises humanity, human needs and economic growth without acknowledging our dependence on the natural world. This paper also confronts the difficult consequences of this fundamental moral shift. But first let's briefly examine overpopulation within an historical context.

2. A brief history of Australia’s population growth

Indigenous population

Estimates are that continent-wide there were between 750,000 to 800,000 First Nation people here before 1788. After British settlement that number was decimated by introduced diseases like smallpox, VD, tuberculosis, bronchitis, pneumonia and chickenpox, with many more dying through the frontier wars, violence, or removal from traditional land.³ By the mid-nineteenth century the Aboriginal population had declined to about 200,000, one fifth of the pre-colonial population, declining to 100,000 in 1900. In the 2021 Census numbers had recovered to 812,000 people of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island heritage.⁴

Non-indigenous population 1788–1945

The first European immigrants were the convicts; 165,000 arrived before transportation ceased in 1868. Free settlement began to grow after 1815, but it was during the Gold Rushes that the European-Australian population really took-off, increasing from 190,000 in 1840 to 1,145,585 in 1860, a six-fold increase. By 1900 the population had more than tripled to 3,765,339, due to immigration and high fertility.⁵ Most women had at least seven children, with 20% having eleven or more. However, the infant mortality rate was high with 104 babies per thousand dying before their first birthday.

The main motives for population growth in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were two myths: Australia’s supposed “limitless resources” and the “yellow peril” fear. Nineteenth century culture was profoundly influenced by the myth of progress symbolised, in the words of our National Anthem, by “golden soil and wealth for toil” and “boundless plains to share.” There was also fear of a “Yellow Peril” threatening to overwhelm Australia with an influx of Chinese who left their homeland during the collapse of the Qing dynasty after the Opium Wars (1839 and 1856). This led to restrictions on Asian immigration to protect “white Australia” and, post-1860, to the encouragement by the Australian colonies of large numbers of Anglophone migrants. After the Gold Rush influx, some 1.2 million British assisted and unassisted immigrants arrived, with 400,000 going to Queensland, half of them government-assisted.⁶

Despite the loss of many young men in the 1914-1918 war, by 1920 the population had grown to 5,360,492. Commonwealth and state governments encouraged both natural increase and

immigration and the slogan “populate or perish” was widely used. Fertility fell during the Great Depression of the 1930s but would rebound strongly after WWII. By 1940 the population reached 7 million.

The following table outlines population growth from 1788 to 2021.⁷

Date	Population	Comment
Pre-1788	About 700,000 – 800,000	Aboriginal population before 1788.
1788	1,487	Most likely number of people on First Fleet.
1800	5,217	Slow increase due to wars with France
1820	33,000	Increase in transportation after 1815.
1840	190,000	Increase due to free settlement.
1860	1,145,356	Influx due to the Gold Rushes.
1900	3,765,339	High rates of fertility and immigration.
1920	5,360,462	Post-World War I population.
1945	7,391,692	Increase largely due to fertility.
1950	8,177,342	The immigration increase began slowly...
1970	12,793,034	...but had taken-off after the mid-1950s.
1990	16,960,597	Large refugee intakes from Asia and the Middle East
2000	19,274,701	Immigration slows down in 1990s
2021	25,788,215	Elevated immigration dominates population increase

Post-1945

After World War II, the 1949 Communist take-over of China and the Korean War (1950-1953), there was increased consciousness of Asia in Australia. This volatility provided the context of the “populate or perish” ideology and was used to promote high rates of immigration. The Chifley Labor government appointed Arthur Calwell immigration minister and preference was initially given to British-born immigrants, but Calwell soon broadened that out to include displaced Europeans. Between 1945 and 1965, two million immigrants arrived, transforming Australian society.



Arthur Calwell (1896-1973)

“White Australia” abandoned

In 1966 the Holt Coalition government decided that all immigrants were to be subject to the same rules with discrimination on the grounds of race forbidden. In 1973 the Whitlam Labor government formally renounced the White Australia policy, replacing it with a policy of multiculturalism so that by the early-2000s about two-fifths of Australian immigrants were Asian. While immigration numbers fell during the Whitlam years (1972-1975), the Fraser Coalition government (1975-1983) boosted the intake on humanitarian grounds, settling many Indochinese refugees following the Vietnam war.

Despite the post-WWII baby boom, immigration rather than fertility accounted for the more than three-fold increase in population between 1945 and 2021. In 1955 the fertility rate was 3.18; it had decreased to 1.83 by 2020. From 2001 until the 2020 coronavirus pandemic, immigration accounted for just over 55% of population increase. The 2021 Census “found that almost half of Australians have a parent born overseas (48.2 per cent) and the population continues to be drawn from around the globe, with 27.6 per cent reporting a birthplace overseas.”⁸ Before 1945, 75% of immigrants were from Britain and Ireland. From 1945 to 1973 most immigrants were from European countries, but during the Whitlam and Fraser governments (1972 to 1983) there was a decisive shift to people from east and south Asia and the Middle East.

Population surge 2000–2020

In 2000 Australia’s population was 19.2 million.⁹ In mid-2021 it was 25.8 million, an addition of 6.6 million people, a 34% increase. This is adding 314,000 people each year to the population. This increase is more than twice the average for OECD countries. With Australia’s fertility rate at 1.83, well below the population replacement rate of 2.1 births per woman, population growth has been largely driven by overseas immigration and a multi-partisan push for a “Big Australia”. As Dr Peter Cook points out: “This rapid population growth has had a series of cascading negative impacts such as infrastructure congestion, stagnant growth in incomes for working people, reduced housing affordability, a deteriorating standard of living and environmental degradation.”¹⁰

With the arrival of Covid-19 in early-2020, Australia’s international borders closed and population growth abruptly slowed. In the year to March 2020, net immigration was 239,200. In the following year, emigration exceeded immigration by 95,100. With the help of natural increase, Australia’s population still grew, but by only 0.14%, less than a tenth of the rate over the previous decade.¹¹ However, this doesn’t mean an immediate decrease in population, even if immigration is not restored post-pandemic. “Without net overseas migration and with fertility remaining below replacement rates,” the government’s 2020 *Population Statement* says, population growth will take a generation to “turn negative.”¹²

3. An optimum population for Australia

Ecological impacts of Australia's population growth

Prior to Europeans arriving Australia's population had been relatively stable. By 2022 it was more than 26-times the pre-1788 level. Stable human numbers allow environmental stability. Our 26-fold population increase, combined with modern, resource-intensive lifestyles has had a devastating impact on our fragile landscape and unique biodiversity.

The notion that ever-increasing numbers of people don't have an impact on the natural world is erroneous. As we've seen, our expanding population has led to the worst mammal extinction record in the world. Among the endangered animals are koalas which are vulnerable in NSW and Queensland where wide-spread clearing for urban expansion fragments the forests upon which they depend. In such close proximity to human settlements, introduced animals like dogs and foxes, as well as cars and trucks, constantly threaten them.

In early-2021 researchers reported that 19 out of 20 Australian ecosystems studied were so degraded that they were heading for collapse. By ecosystem collapse, we mean that a system is so fundamentally altered that the loss of crucial species makes other species unviable and their demise undermines others, until what remains is a simplified system with little resemblance to the original ecosystem. These degraded ecosystems included the Murray-Darling Basin, the largest river system on the continent, with the Darling River largely destroyed through over-extraction for irrigation, particularly during drought, although the 2020-2022 floods have temporarily improved the situation. Also listed as degraded were the Great Barrier Reef, the Ningaloo Reef and the far-north Queensland tropical rainforests, together with some fifteen lesser-known regions.¹³



Murray-Darling Basin. Source: ABC News: Ben Spraggon

In addition, since 1788 we have lost

- 75% of rainforests and 50% of all forests
- 90% of temperate woodlands and mallee
- 90% of brigalow scrub in Queensland, where clearing still occurs.

Many reptile species are also under threat, with some 650 million killed each year by feral and domestic cats. Other consequences of human activities impact the natural world like

- feral animals, e.g. cats, rabbits, dogs, deer, wild pigs, goats, brumbies
- invasive non-indigenous plant species
- agricultural, extractive, urban and industrial development
- pollution of soil, water, air
- clearing of native vegetation, often resulting in salinisation
- overuse of resources e.g., fishing out of oceans
- use of carbon-based fuels and global warming.

The *Australia State of the Environment 2021* report says that “Clearing of native vegetation is a major cause of habitat loss and fragmentation, and has been implicated in the listing of 60% of Australia’s threatened species ... Land clearing can also lead to processes that degrade soils, such as erosion, salinisation, loss of organic matter and depleted fertility ... Native vegetation clearing in Australia is driven mainly by expansion of land dedicated to agriculture and, to a lesser extent, forestry and infrastructure, including urban development.”¹⁴ The *Australia State of the Environment 2021* report further emphasised, “Population growth contributes to all the pressures described in this report. Each person added to our population increases demand on natural resources to provide food, shelter and materials for living.”

Given the damage already done, it might seem like a misnomer to speak of an “optimum” population for Australia. But while history can’t be reversed, we can at least seek a number that limits further damage to the environment. There have been various studies done of an optimum population for the continent.

Studies of Australia’s population

In 1975 the Whitlam government commissioned a National Population Inquiry, chaired by W.D. Borrie. Understandably in those times of limited environmental awareness, it was sceptical about the idea of an optimum population, but did not anticipate rapid or endless growth. In 1974 Prime Minister Gough Whitlam had said: “I don’t envisage any dramatic increase in our present population and indeed I would not wish to see one.”¹⁵ Subsequent Fraser and Hawke governments were more enthusiastic about immigration without addressing the environmental and social impacts of population growth.

However, the 1994 Commonwealth Parliamentary Committee Report *Australia’s Population Carrying Capacity: One Nation – Two Ecologies*, chaired by former science minister in the Hawke government, Barry Jones, actually tackled the question seriously.¹⁶ The committee asked: “What...population level Australia can support in fifty years,” and “whether we should be setting a population target,” taking into account “environmental, economic and social issues.” Of the many submissions received, “over 90% advocated population stability, or lower population growth.” In 1994 the population was 17.8 million.

The committee distinguished population policy from immigration. “It is essential that Governments ...understand that establishing a population policy is a primary goal and that setting immigration levels is a secondary consequence of the population goal.” The committee explored five possible options: (1) a 50-100 million people scenario which was said to be “politically and socially impossible”; (2) a high population/low resource use scenario with a population range of 30-50 million which “could only be adopted with political consensus,” requiring “higher density cities, less car dependence, more care about waste disposal...less consumption and high resource use”; (3) a modest increase/restraint scenario of 23-30 million; (4) a scenario of 17 to 23 million, a figure with “strong community support”; (5) a reduction to 5-7 million, or to the pre-1788 population of one million.

The 1996-elected Howard Coalition government ignored this detailed report, as have all subsequent federal governments. Howard also ignored an Australian Academy of Science working party report (1994) on Australian population. After careful study by the AAS working party, the report concluded: “In our view, the quality of all aspects of our children's lives will be maximised if the population of Australia by the mid-21st Century is kept to the low, stable end of the achievable range, i.e. to approximately 23 million.”¹⁷

In an ABC discussion in 1998 of Tim Flannery's book *The Future Eaters*, the distinguished demographer, Jack Caldwell, said that “We can feed 25 million people without irreparable damage to our resources...[taking] into account the fragility of the Australian environment.”¹⁸ Caldwell expected that the population would reach 25 million *by 2050*, but in fact we reached that figure in 2018.

On 26 November 2013 the ABS issued the report “Population Projections”. It stated that Australia's population “is projected to increase to between 36.8 and 48.3 million people by 2061, and to between 42.4 and 70.1 million people by 2101.” These figures are based on an annual 1.6% average population increase with immigration providing 56% and natural increase 44%. This is a purely statistical report with no consideration given to the environmental, social or moral implications of population increase. The *Australia State of the Environment 2016* report takes into account questions of where we live and how we live. It notes that “the greatest impacts of population growth and demographic change on the environment are in our capital cities and along the coast of Australia, particularly in Queensland.”

The *Australia State of the Environment 2021* report points out that some “25% of all nationally listed threatened plants and 46% of nationally listed threatened animals can be found in Australia's cities and towns.” A whole range of human activity, particularly land clearing and roads, impact native animals like the koala and the cassowary and the report particularly singles out road-kill with “millions of animals struck and killed on Australian roads every year.”

What these reports show is that it is very difficult to reach an agreed optimum number and that the key issues will be the moral and ethical values that the Australian community espouses. What is really important? How should we live? What do we value? What levels of consumption do we espouse? Above all, how do we view our relationship to the natural world and its biodiversity?

One group who've made up their mind about these ethical issues is the “Big Australia” brigade.

“Big Australia”

If the origins of the immigration program were strategic – “populate or perish” – the dominating motivation nowadays is economic. But the costs of economic growth on the natural world are never counted. The Australian Academy of Science warned in 2010 that population increase

“shouldn’t take place without a full analysis of the consequences for the environment, in terms of land, water, sustainable agriculture, pressure on native flora and fauna, and social issues.”¹⁹ Later that year a report was published focusing on precisely these issues. It contained a modelling exercise by Flinders University and CSIRO Sustainable Ecosystems.²⁰ It concluded that “higher levels of NOM (net overseas migration) impose greater adverse impacts on the quality of our natural and built environments, other things being equal.” Impacts included urban water supply, energy security, greenhouse gases and urban encroachment on agricultural land. The Department of Immigration, which commissioned the report, did its best to discredit it and soon removed it from their website.

For the last few decades there have been powerful, vociferous, pro-growth business and economic lobbies, addicted to infinite growth in a finite world, promoting a “Big Australia”. We’re assured that we live in a land that’s just waiting for more immigrants to “develop” it, while ignoring the environmental impacts. In early-2021 former Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, called for a “big boost” in population, telling the National Press Club that: “We run the risk by mid-century of becoming a second-rate country, one that fails to live up to its possibilities and potential.” A larger population, he said, would also guarantee security.²¹

Demographer Professor Peter McDonald argued in 2017 that there were not enough younger people to fill the 4.1 million new jobs which would open by 2024. He concluded that “without migration Australia would face a labour supply crunch unlike anything it has ever faced before.” Migrants were also needed to balance out the looming excess of older people, as well as providing taxpayers to support them.²² Demographer Dr Liz Allen agrees. She says the Covid-19 slowdown in Australia’s population is disastrous. With immigration numbers falling and fertility declining from 1.74 in 2020 to 1.5 in 2021, she says “we won’t have enough people to work and pay taxes and fund all the roads, hospitals and welfare initiatives we need to function as a country” resulting in “a demographic disaster.” With Australia’s population ageing, Allen argues that as older people exit the workforce, a shrinking taxpayer base won’t be able to support them.²³

For McDonald and Allen, it’s all about economics; the environment doesn’t get a look-in. But these economic arguments have been challenged, finding that the saving on infrastructure cancel any extra costs of the elderly, if migration is low and population is allowed to stabilise.²⁴

With Australia’s birth rate below replacement level, “Big Australia” advocates claim that the only way to increase markets and consumers is through high immigration intakes. Migration commentator Dr Abul Rizvi, for instance, says that “migrants are crucial to the post-Covid-19 recovery” and that, when “net migration does move significantly into negative territory, history tells us that correlates with much higher levels of unemployment, as well as larger numbers of people who become destitute.”²⁵ What history actually tells us is that, when unemployment and destitution are high, this drives high emigration. But emigration is not the cause of high unemployment, it is a remedy. Today, developed countries with low or even negative population growth have the lowest unemployment and inequality. Indeed, tighter labour markets typically promote higher productivity and lower unemployment and inequality.²⁶

Opposition to population growth

Despite these pro-growth lobbies, according to a 2021 survey by the Australian Population Research Institute, 51% of Australians oppose further immigration-fuelled growth and 67% want to limit Australia’s population to no more than 30,000,000.²⁷ Author of the report, Dr. Katharine Betts, says, “Opposition to population growth is concentrated among young people, while support for it is concentrated among people born overseas, as well as people who are university educated... Between 51% and 67% of people have a gut feeling that they do not want the massive

growth that the big end of town is quietly forcing on them. Most voters do not want high population.”

The business lobby has been claiming since the early 2000s that we’re short of skilled workers and need migrants to fill the shortfall. Despite 2,846,400 immigrants entering the country between 2000 and 2015, the Australian Industry Group (AIG) and the Business Council of Australia (BCA) still claim that we’re short of skilled workers. As ABC Business Editor, Ian Verrender, pointed out, “if skilled labour is in such short supply, why aren’t wages being bid into the stratosphere by desperate employers?” Yet “for most of the past decade, wages growth has been the slowest on record and ... showing no sign of recovery.”²⁸ Unwilling to train resident citizens, the suspicion is that the real aim of industry and business is to get cheap workers. Interestingly, despite the Covid-19 lockdown, we were still bringing in some 50,470 workers in early-2021.

In May 2020, Labor Senator Kristina Keneally reflected the view of many when she said that temporary immigrants have “hurt many Australian workers, contributing to unemployment, underemployment and low wage growth.” She describes this approach as “lazy”, saving industry and business the cost of “investing in skills and training.” Coronavirus is a chance to “restart a migration program,” asking whether “we want migrants to return to Australia in the same numbers” as before Covid-19? “Our answer,” she says, “should be no.”²⁹

The Big Australia *putsch* were clearly surprised by Keneally’s comments, with the pro-growth *Australian Financial Review* proclaiming: “Hansonite populism on migration won’t restore jobs and growth”.³⁰ But as *Crikey* journalist Bernard Keane pointed out, the *AFR*’s reaction “illustrates just how crucial high immigration is for neoliberalism.”³¹ Joe Hildebrand argued that Keneally wasn’t “dog-whistling to the right, she’s dog-whistling to the left.” She’s telling progressives: “That Labor...is going back to being the party of the working-class and middle-class...of mainstream, suburban Australia.”³²

Nevertheless, the pro-growth lobby remains very influential. Economist, Dr Judith Sloan, says that “the lobbying behind immigration is so strong that both [political] parties have concluded the views of ordinary folk can be ignored. These forces include the bureaucracy... big business, property developers, the universities and various interest groups, some ethnically based.”³³ She adds: “What Treasury won’t admit is that the distribution of the gains [from immigration] are snaffled mainly by the immigrants themselves, and the businesses that can secure larger domestic markets — think property developers — and save on paying for training. It’s a great deal for them. Whether it’s a great deal for everyone else is an open question.”³⁴

Carrying capacity

The other “open question” is whether ever-increasing population is a “great deal” for our environment. This is directly linked to the question of the continent’s carrying capacity, that is the number of people it can support while maintaining its ecological integrity without it being degraded. We’ve seen that Australia’s fragile ecosystems are already seriously compromised, so we are really speaking about protecting what is left. So far, the only official attempt to tackle this question was the 1994 Parliamentary Committee Report *Australia’s Population Carrying Capacity: One Nation – Two Ecologies*. This largely resulted from the influence of Barry Jones who, together with former federal Labor member for Wills, Kelvin Thomson, are two of the few politicians who have taken the population question seriously. As we saw, the committee concluded that the scenario of stabilising population at 17 to 23 million people was a figure with “strong community support.”

So, the question is: Is it possible to nominate a specific number of people who can live sustainably and in balance with nature in Australia? Can we ascertain a maximum number beyond which we won't go in order to maintain ecological balance and biodiversity? Until now, population numbers have been dominated by neoliberal economics, ignoring the fact that the more people there are, the greater the pressure is on the continent's ecosystems. Modern societies chew-up far more than poorer, less developed ones, which perversely means that immigration from poorer countries to Australia moves people from low resource-use regions to one of the world's highest resource-use countries.

What has been consistently omitted from the discussion of carrying capacity is whether ecological ethics should play a role in determining how many people should be in Australia. Seemingly, technophiles, pro-growth fantasists, "rational" economists and wishful thinking demographers believe population must continue to grow. It's as though the world had no meaning or purpose beyond supporting our growth mania; the unspoken assumption is that everything can and should be sacrificed for economics.

Sure, if we could reduce the developed world's resource consumption, we might get some slack, but this would be immediately negated by people in developing countries emerging from poverty and expecting to live a more consumer-oriented life-style. This is already happening in China and parts of Latin America. According to the Global Footprint Network, to share Earth's biocapacity equally among eight billion people would mean lifestyles equivalent to the average in Indonesia or Honduras. It all comes back to population; there are just too many of us.

We are in a totally new moral situation; we actually need to **reduce** population to restore sustainability and act responsibly toward future generations. Humankind has never faced a challenge like this before. It is terrifying because it touches us so deeply as persons and communities and challenges our most profoundly engrained convictions about ourselves. If we don't constitute the meaning of the world, what does?

This paper argues that we need a new moral approach to deal with the ethical crisis that we face. We need a new, more all-embracing moral principle that includes not only humankind, but also the natural world. We have to question the key moral issues and ethical values that we espouse as a community. What is important to us? How should we live? What do we *really* value?

4. A new moral principle

Never before in human history have there been so many people. Linked to global warming, biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, pollution of the oceans, landscape degradation, overuse of natural resources, we live in a world fast moving towards, perhaps already in, a state of disaster.

Then Covid-19 appeared, creating an immediate crisis. But crises have their up-side, as Luke Bretherton says:

“Crises force us to ask whether what we take to be moral is really good or true. [In]... crises our assumed ways of doing things no longer fit the world we live in...In a crisis we must try to discern and discover whether what we take to be moral can help us respond to this new situation, or does it need re-calibrating, or even rejecting.”³⁵

We have always lived within moral and ethical constructs that guide our behaviour, but as nature collapses around us, and Covid-19 impacts us, we have to ask whether our accepted morality needs “re-calibrating or even rejecting.”

Kairos

This is a frightening prospect and it’s understandable that we regress to denial. We all tend to avoid inconvenient realities. We are very good at what sociologist Kari Norgaard calls “socially organised denial,” narratives that help us deflect the implications of threatening problems, so we try to revert to established ways of doing things.³⁶ The reaction to global warming, ecosystem collapse and COVID-19 is similar: it’s all too much to take in, so we just fit it into a kind of new normal and then try to get on with life.

But there is increasingly nowhere to hide. Young people, like Greta Thunberg and the striking school students get it, but deluded, death-denying “olds” like conservative and leftist politicians and global warming deniers say that the students are “immature”, they are being “manipulated” and they should stay in school until they “grow-up”. What the students see and the “adults” don’t get is that we have been plunged into what the ancient Greeks called a *καιρός* (*kairos*), a crisis moment, the time for taking decisions with far-reaching implications. There are two words in Greek for “time”: *κρόνος* (*kronos*) meaning clock or measured time, and *kairos*, crisis or crunch time when we must decide because we have run out of options.

This is where “sensible” people will accuse those concerned with overpopulation of being “catastrophists”. Things are not really that bad, they say. Technology and better management will solve our environmental problems because human beings are extraordinarily creative under pressure. What these critics don’t get is that our cultural and moral systems are no longer adequate, that we don’t constitute the entire meaning of the cosmos, that we are a very late development in evolution, literally “born yesterday.” We not only face an ecological crisis, but a moral crisis as well.

Anthropocentrism

Traditionally, the word used to describe our dominant relationship with nature is anthropocentrism. Thomas Berry says that we have become besotted with “the pathos of the human,” and that anthropocentrism is rooted in “our failure to think of ourselves as a species, interconnected with and biologically interdependent on the rest of reality.”³⁷ All sentient species are species-centric; the difference with us is that we are self-conscious, with a highly developed reasoning faculty. We can see ourselves within the context of our environment and we have the moral facility to make decisions about our relationship to the world. With environmental disaster now confronting us, we must question the kind of monomania embedded in anthropocentrism.

We need to shift our moral focus away from ourselves and our needs onto the natural world and its ecosystems. Achieving this will demand a moral revolution that emphasises the absolute priority of nature over humanity.

Support for this comes from a surprising source. Pope Francis, in his revolutionary encyclical letter *Laudato si'*, says that “the Bible has no place for a tyrannical anthropocentrism unconcerned for other creatures,” adding that “nowadays, we must forcefully reject the notion that our being created in God’s image and given dominion over the Earth justifies absolute domination over other creatures...[Rather] this implies a relationship of mutual responsibility between human beings and nature.”³⁸ Here Francis undermines a distorted Christian theological emphasis on denigration of the body and matter which was traditionally seen as antithetical to spiritual growth and the search for God.

Science also helps here with a new word to describe our geological epoch: “Anthropocene”. This describes the period since the Industrial Revolution, with dramatically increasing population and fossil energy use impacting Earth’s climate, ecosystems and biodiversity, resulting in natural systems, established millennia ago, breaking down.³⁹ It describes a period of extreme anthropocentrism in which humans have become the dominant force in shaping the Earth’s natural processes.

The Earth-centric principle

With human numbers increasing far beyond sustainability, we are being forced to abandon anthropocentrism as a moral focus and to shift our priorities to Earth and biodiversity as the primary values. We need an **entirely new** fundamental moral principle rooted in the priority of nature. As I have argued in my book *The Depopulation Imperative*:

“The core moral principle that must govern every person, community, human action and decision, is that the wonderful, rich biological diversity of life, expressed in all its detail and species, as well as the maintenance of the integrity and good of the Earth and its ecosystems and landscapes, must take priority over everything, even humankind.”⁴⁰

This sounds bland, but we cannot underestimate the radical nature of this principle. It is saying unequivocally that biodiversity and the Earth must come **before** all personal and communal human needs, desires, wishes, ambitions and benefits. It shifts the emphasis from humanity to the Earth. It means that every ethical decision we make must give priority to the Earth and its species. This is a fundamental and decisive shift, because until now we asked only what impact specific decisions would have on human welfare. Where once we were the primary focus, now it is nature and its ecosystems.

Placing humanity in an Earth-centric context

This shift re-establishes our biological connectedness with all life and Earth itself. We are genetically rooted in it and totally dependent upon it. We don't constitute the planet's meaning and purpose; we can't exist outside it. To think otherwise is delusional. The Earth is not here for us to exploit and destroy. Individual human lives and particular human communities are not absolute but must fit within a broader natural context. Thomas Berry says that all human realities "must now be judged primarily by the extent to which they inhibit, ignore, or foster a mutually enhancing human–Earth relationship."⁴¹ This is an ethical revolution for post-modern, neo-capitalist individualism and modern economics, as well as for the religious traditions that place humankind at the centre of reality.

Conscience

The principle of Earth first shifts the emphasis from a both/and vision – both humankind and environment – to a primary focus on the natural world. This doesn't invalidate traditional morality but rather transfers the emphasis previously attached almost exclusively to humankind across to nature. The implication of living in an Earth-centric world is that not only do we need to develop:

- a **consciousness** focused on environmental responsibility but, more importantly ...
- a **conscience** guided by the priority of nature.

Conscience is the deep-seated, instinctive perception that we all have that tells us when we are acting with integrity and when we have done wrong. It's more than a subjective feeling; rather it's our moral compass, the quiet, sometimes fragile voice speaking within us, helping us to discern right and wrong, guiding us toward consistency and probity in our lives. In the context of the new moral principle, it refers outward to our relationships, **primarily** with the natural world and **secondarily** with others.

Environmental sin

We often speak of individuals, or groups like corporations, as "lacking a moral compass." That is, they seem to have no sense that what they are doing is wrong. Perhaps it's here that we can introduce the concept of environmental sin. The notion of sin won't appeal to everyone, but it remains a potent word in the language to the extent that there well may be industries, like the coal industry, that are literally "living in sin"!

Patriarch Bartholomew I of the Orthodox Church, known as the "Green Patriarch", who has a long and distinguished record supporting environmental issues, says unequivocally that those who commit "crimes against the natural world" are "sinners". "It is inconceivable," he says, "to

claim to be concerned about the human person while destroying...the Earth. For us, taking care of the natural resources of our planet is a matter of being truthful before God and the created order... This is why we repeatedly condemn environmental abuse as nothing other than a sin.”⁴²

In his 2015 encyclical letter, *Laudato si'*, Pope Francis says that Patriarch Bartholomew

“...challenges us to acknowledge our sins against creation: ‘For human beings... to destroy the biological diversity of God’s creation; for human beings to degrade the integrity of the Earth by causing changes in its climate, by stripping the Earth of its natural forests or destroying its wetlands; for human beings to contaminate the Earth’s waters, its land, its air, and its life – these are sins.’”⁴³

It is significant that Francis, the leader of 1.34 billion Catholics (17.7% of the world's population) and Bartholomew, the leader of 190 million Orthodox, are willing to call-out environmental vandalism as sin.

5. Applying the new moral principle of Earth first

Tough decisions

This principle means that when decisions have to be made about human-nature interactions, the protection of nature comes first. This is easy to say, but it will be very difficult to apply because, understandably, the people impacted will struggle to protect their interests and livelihoods.

In Australia, at a minimum, it will mean the end of coal-mining and several other extractive industries, as well as the end of native forest logging, any further clearing of land, restraints on irrigation especially for inappropriate crops like cotton and rice, and a severe limitation of any further occupation and development of coastal areas, particularly in Queensland, NSW and WA. It will place stringent limits on clearing of native vegetation for any further expansion of suburbia on the edge of our cities. We need to confront those industries and activities that contribute to global warming and biodiversity loss. We can't continue to live in excessive affluence with the Global Footprint Network finding that Australia had the thirteenth [highest ecological footprint](#) by country in 2022.⁴⁴

However, ending unsustainable industries and behaviours is not enough. Even the most conscientious Earth-centric people consume resources, occupy land from which natural ecosystems have been displaced and generate persistent wastes. We must also limit our population and allow it to contract, in order to restore sustainability.

Immigration

A key to dealing with the impact on nature involves immigration. Some people argue that high immigration to Australia would ease overpopulation elsewhere, but our contribution is too small to be effective in this regard. Instead, it might have the opposite effect since vociferous support for population growth in Australia undermines political will to reduce population growth elsewhere. Leading by example would be a greater global contribution.

High immigration causes ecological harm through two channels: firstly, because immigration drives Australia's population growth, exacerbating impacts on our local environment and, secondarily, most immigrants come from countries with much lower consumption rates than Australia, so their adoption of our consumer lifestyle increases global greenhouse gas emissions

and our use of non-renewable resources. As we've seen, our population has doubled since 1970 and increased by 6.5 million since 2000. Immigration has to be slowed if we are to limit our ecological footprint and protect biodiversity. But then came the pandemic, one indirect result of which was that border closures led to a sharp fall in Australia's immigration numbers in the two-year period from March 2020.

Pro-growth apologists like Liz Allen and the BCA think this is a disaster, but in fact it's a chance to pause and reflect on a policy that has had such dire environmental consequences. It gives us an opportunity for the general community to think through the issue of immigration and to face the consequences of the adoption of a moral policy of nature first. This is not just a *kairos* for ecology, but also for the mainstream Australian community to reflect on Australia's population and to make their wishes known to governments which, up until now, have been dominated by an economic and demographic cabal for whom endless growth is the only moral principle. It gives us a chance to reject the notion of a "Big Australia."

Refugees

Here a distinction needs to be made between refugees and immigrants. While Australia has welcomed immigrants, especially when they do specialist or undesirable jobs that citizens are either untrained or unwilling to do, we have been far less generous to refugees. According to the 1951 UNHCR Refugee Convention, a refugee is "someone who has fled their country and is unwilling to return...owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion." The term "asylum seeker" is often used interchangeably with the word refugee but, strictly speaking, asylum seekers are people applying for refugee status but who have not yet received it. In international law, refugees and asylum seekers have a right to protection and support, no matter how they arrived in a country of refuge.

Worldwide in 2019, there were 26 million registered refugees and 4.2 million asylum seekers.⁴⁵ This number is set to increase enormously as the threat of climate change and environmental collapse begin to be felt and wars like the Russian invasion of Ukraine and the civil war in Yemen generate millions of refugees.

Between 1977 and 2019, Australia issued 523,790 offshore humanitarian visas, as well as 74,368 onshore visas between 1980 and 2019. This contrasts with a 5.9 million net migration intake since 1977. In the 2019-2020 financial year the government issued 14,993 refugee visas and set a cap of 13,750 for 2020-2021. While applying a very critical approach to immigration, Australia should welcome refugees, especially those from Pacific Island countries like Kiribati and Tuvalu which are already badly impacted by rising sea levels that result from burning our coal exports.

6. Opposition to the “Earth first” principle

“Re-open” Australia

Despite the fact that Australia’s economy has bounced back in 2021-2022 and there are more Australians in jobs now than before the pandemic, the pressure to re-open Australia to immigration is on from the pro-growth, business and multicultural lobbies with the support of some journalists, particularly at *The Financial Review*, the ABC and SBS. It’s clear that once you apply a principle of “Earth first”, the opposition will be relentless, because so much vested interest is tied-up with anthropocentric structures. Opposition will come from many sources including

- pro-growth apologists who believe in infinite growth in a finite world
- proponents of individualism
- supporters of multiculturalism
- religious anthropocentrists
- social justice proponents who say that the poor must take priority.

Pro-growth apologists

Economic life in Australia is still dominated by a pro-growth lobby which sees the market as an independent, spontaneous reality that operates – apparently miraculously – according to its own dynamics. This economic philosophy is, as George Monbiot says, “a conscious attempt to reshape human life and shift the locus of power” away from the community and representative government, to businesses and corporations.⁴⁶ With Australia’s fertility rate below replacement, the only way that they can continue to increase markets and consumers is through immigration. Infinite economic growth depends on

- an endless supply of raw materials to make consumables
- ever-increasing numbers of consumers addicted to buying these products.

Since the 1960s, Australia has been an integral part of the world’s seemingly endless supply of raw materials. In the “immortal” words of Henry Bolte the 1955-1972 premier of Victoria:

“We can make this country into a quarry to serve the whole world.”

The result is that Australia has tied itself to exporting raw materials like iron ore, food and fibre, all without regard for the environmental and ecosystem consequences. At 19% of globally traded

coal, we are the world's second largest exporter of this mineral, *the* major contributor to global warming. We are still dominated by Bolte's quarry mentality.

Australia also encourages consumers to buy cheap overseas-made products. The pro-growth lobby needs a supply of people to become consumers in a throw-away culture. Remember Craig Reucassel in the ABCTV series *War on Waste* when he stood on top of a massive pile of 6000 kilograms of discarded, almost new clothes in Sydney's Martin Place to show how much goes to landfill every 10 minutes?



Craig Reucassel in *War on Waste*. Credit: ABC TV

According to the blog *Glam Corner*, each year the average Australian woman buys 27 kilograms of new clothing, wears only 33% of it and throws away 23 kilos.⁴⁷

Seemingly lacking any moral compass, the pro-growth, mining and export lobbies, with their ingrained “quarry” mentality, have already done enormous damage to Australia's environment. The time has come to apply to them the moral principle of “Earth first” and say that mining coal, destroying forests and excessive consumerism is, as Patriarch Bartholomew says, “sinful.”

Other lobbies, such as Australia's university Vice-Chancellors, have been recruited as growth advocates through narrow self-interest. Deep cuts to government funding have led to universities becoming “overly focused on money ... and the enrolment of full free-paying students” from overseas. Former Vice-Chancellor of Australian Catholic University, Greg Craven, says they “got into the business of making money ... for the grubbiest reasons” chasing “buildings and ... rankings.” He points out that universities are not corporations designed to make money, or to promise foreign students work rights and permanent residence, but “to multiply social capital.”⁴⁸ Government should be funding universities adequately, not bringing in foreign students as cash cows.

Individualism

In fact, it's not only the pro-growth brigade who stymie the application of the Earth first principle. It may well be those of us whose lives and attitudes have become so individualistic that we are unable to grasp an all-embracing, environment-first idea like the priority of nature.

The origin of modern, atomised individualism is rooted in “post-modernism”. This is a loose agglomeration of ideas originating in post-war French Marxist philosophy, that are generally lumped together as a movement that has come to permeate culture and education, particularly universities. It claims that human understanding is limited to temporary, subjective ideas and visions that characterise particular groups and individuals and their specific experiences. The claim is that ideas and concepts that transcend particular times and places, that is “big”, universal concepts, are just illusions because our human knowledge is circumscribed, largely by our history, culture, language and the community in which we live.

Post-modernism claims that our particular experiences and histories prevent us generalising to form universal ideas that sum up broad human experience and preclude the formation of universally binding moral imperatives. Contemporary individualism prioritises personal and particular communities’ experience of reality and actively encourages suspicion of broad or universalist claims – like a moral imperative that puts Earth first. While there is some truth to these claims, this kind of individualism makes it very difficult to grasp a big, grand moral vision like the shift from the centrality of humankind to the priority of nature.

Supporters of multiculturalism

Multiculturalism is one of those words that is often used in public discourse, but rarely defined. It means different things to different people. It was the Polish-born ANU sociologist, George Zubrzycki, who shaped Australian multiculturalism and it was the Whitlam government immigration minister, Al Grassby, who brought it into our political lexicon in a paper entitled *A multi-cultural society for the future*. The Fraser government also strongly supported multicultural policies and established the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs to raise awareness of cultural diversity and promote social cohesion, understanding and tolerance. Multiculturalism has now been accepted as policy by successive federal governments although its goals have never really been put to the citizenry for serious political debate.

Nevertheless, there’s no doubt that Australia is a successful multicultural society and the need for acceptance, tolerance and harmony is accepted by the vast majority, even if they don’t always embrace the word “multicultural”.

They’re right to be cautious, because the word has never been defined and is often used by various groups pushing their own agendas. It really ignores the limits of cultural, legal and religious accommodation that a society like ours has to make to particular and diverse ethnic groups. It tends to highlight cultural differences like beliefs, practices, traditions and lifestyles rather than what we have in common, and it can subtly introduce a legal and moral relativism that sometimes undermines hard-won democratic rights and the common law tradition.

Multiculturalism is a derivative of Australia’s immigration policy and many migrants understandably push for more of their nationality to be admitted. Intimately linked to this is the understandable but constant pressure for family reunion. However, successive Coalition governments since 2013 have prioritised skilled migration rather than families and thereby vastly increased the demand for family reunion visas. According to Department of Home Affairs Visa Statistics for 2019-2020, Australia admitted 95,843 immigrants under the Skill Stream (69.5% of the total migration program) and 41,961 (or 30.4%) under the Family Stream. Of these 37,118 were under the Partner Stream and 4,399 under the Parent Stream.⁴⁹ In June 2020 there were 213,805 first stage applications in the pipeline for the Family Reunion scheme. Clearly there is still tremendous pressure on this scheme, even if government priorities are elsewhere.

Religious anthropocentrism

Given their long histories, most of the great religious traditions, with the possible exception of Mahayana Buddhism, are anthropocentric. This is particularly true of Judeo-Christianity which historian Lyn White accuses of being “the most anthropocentric religion the world has [ever] seen.” He argued that Christian theology saw nature as created exclusively to serve humankind, the only true image of God.⁵⁰

While there is an element of truth in White’s accusation, things have changed radically with Pope Francis and *Laudato si’* with its outright rejection of “tyrannical anthropocentrism” and lack of concern for other creatures. For most of its history Christianity denigrated the body and matter; materiality was seen as antithetical to spiritual growth and the search for God. Francis also repudiates this. While he doesn’t embrace biocentrism, he emphasises the value of nature. Christian spirituality, he says, “proposes a growth marked by moderation and the capacity to be happy with little. It is a return to that simplicity which allows us to stop and appreciate the small things, to be grateful for the opportunities which life affords us, to be spiritually detached from what we possess, and not to succumb to sadness for what we lack. This implies avoiding the dynamic of dominion and the mere accumulation of pleasures” (*Laudato si’*, 222). These notions are already widespread in the other Christian churches and faith traditions, as we’ve seen with the Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew I.

Social justice

One of the complex and difficult problems faced by people concerned with overpopulation is balancing the conviction that there are too many people with maintaining a sense of care for refugees, the marginalised and the poor in developing countries. Social justice advocates say that the problem is not overpopulation, but overconsumption by wealthy nations, an argument summed-up by the well-known Gandhi quotation: “The world has enough for everyone’s need, but not enough for everyone’s greed.” That may or may not have been true when the Mahatma died in January 1948, when the world population was 2.4 billion; it is now more than three times that number. The contemporary question is: is there enough now for everyone’s need? At eight billion people the answer is “no”!

It’s true that it’s not primarily the poor who are driving destructive climate change, nor chewing-up the world’s resources. It is the fifteen per cent of us who live in developed countries like Australia who produce more than half of the world’s carbon emissions. But that is not the whole picture.

Social justice supporters tend to idealise the poor. They overlook the harm that even poor people cause due to their rising numbers, as they are forced to exploit remaining natural ecosystems for the resources they need to live. They assume that once people are lifted out of poverty, they would not be as grasping as people in the developed world. It’s as though lowering the standards of rich countries and raising those of poor countries would lead to everyone meeting in the middle at a happy, sustainable level. Unfortunately, humans are not that altruistic. Even if we were able to lower the consumption demands of developed countries to a more sustainable level – very difficult in democracies – and to increase the living standards of the billions of people in poorer countries, we’d be chewing up even more resources. The key issue here is resource limits. There are simply not enough resources to sustain eight billion people at what we would consider a decent standard of living.

The same limitations apply in Australia. The continent has limits to its resource capacity. At present it is carrying twenty-six times the number of people it sustained in 1788. In addition, we

export 65% of our agricultural production, including beef, wheat, dairy, sugar and wine. In 2017 we were feeding about 61 million people, domestically and overseas.⁵¹

But what this doesn't take into account is the destructive impact of this level of food production on the environment in terms of hard-hoofed animals, water usage, land clearing, the widespread use of chemicals and soil degradation. While "we have just over two arable hectares per person, one of the [highest ratios in the world](#)," that doesn't take into account the destructive impact on the natural world.⁵² In addition, the Australian landscape is among the world's most infertile and climatically unreliable.

In the end we can't deny that eight billion people are chewing up the future as we already need 1.75 planets to provide the resources we consume and to absorb our waste, according to the Global Footprint Network. By 2030, we will need two planets. We simply can't continue to use this level of resource use. The result can only be even greater human suffering and deprivation than exists today.

That is why *the primary* ethical principle has to be biocentric; the Earth must come first. The natural world is not derived from us; it transcends us. As a result, we have to move beyond an anthropocentric to a biocentric ethic. Certainly, social justice has to be part of the equation, but the primary moral emphasis has to be on the Earth.

7. Conclusion

While there is no quick fix for world overpopulation, there is a straight-forward solution to control Australia's population. It's clear that our birth rate will remain below replacement level for the foreseeable future and immigration will drive our on-going increase in numbers. What we need to do is to limit immigration, giving priority to UN-certified refugees, particularly people from Pacific Island nations.

We also need to begin a broad-based community discussion about our priorities. The majority of Australians have already told us that the environment comes first with global warming already impacting us. According to a May 2021 Lowy Institute poll, "six in ten Australians (60%) say 'global warming is a serious and pressing problem.' We should begin taking steps now, even if this involves significant costs."⁵³ In a worldwide survey, the UN Development Programme polled 1.2 million people in 50 countries, many of them young, and found that two thirds of people, including 72% in Australia, say global warming is an emergency. It's clear that the majority of Australians want action on climate change and environmental protection. Likewise, according to the Australian Population Research Institute's 2021 survey, two thirds of Australians think Australia is better off without additional people, and 78% of them agree that the natural environment is under stress with the number of people we already have. This conclusion has been re-enforced by the *Australia State of the Environment 2021* report.

Globally, there is much that could be done to minimise further population growth, but the issue attracts very little attention. Half of all pregnancies are unintended and most of these could have been avoided if the right information and services were deployed.⁵⁴ The wide political support for family planning programs in the 1970s and '80s has dissipated and progress on women's rights and reproductive health services has been far too slow. It would help if developed countries like Australia led the way by welcoming their own population decline for its environmental as well as lifestyle benefits. Perversely, the constant catastrophising of low birth rates in the media has led some countries to withdraw women's access to birth control.⁵⁵ We have to move beyond specious economic nostrums, panic about falling birth rates and government stonewalling, to confront reality. We know we're very good at "socially organised denial," narratives like job losses, or too few taxpayers to maintain services for the aged, all of which help us deflect the implications of threatening problems. The *kairos*, the decision-making moment, has arrived not only for the world, but for Australia. There are already far too many of us for the Earth to support.

In Australia we are in the fortunate position that we can do something about this challenge. We can limit our population growth to maintain the sustainability of our continent. The time has come to do precisely that.

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Sustainable Population Australia

Sustainable Population Australia (SPA) is an independent not-for-profit environmental advocacy organisation established in 1988. SPA seeks to protect the environment and quality of life by ending population growth in Australia and globally, while rejecting racism and involuntary population control. SPA works on many fronts to inform public awareness about population issues from ecological, social and economic viewpoints, and to advocate for how Australia and the world can achieve an ecologically sustainable population.

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Other titles in this series of discussion papers commissioned by Sustainable Population Australia:

Population growth and infrastructure in Australia: the catch-up illusion

Sydney and Melbourne now have worse traffic congestion than New York and Toronto. This congestion is but one symptom of an infrastructure shortfall caused by Australia's rapid population growth, with both births and immigration elevated since the beginning of this century. If these trends continue towards a 'Big Australia', Australian living standards will continue to decline as people are forced into smaller, more expensive and lower-quality housing, endure worsening traffic congestion, pay more to access basic infrastructure and services, and have less access to public services and green space. Our political leaders are claiming that these problems can be managed by decentralisation, better planning and more investment.

This paper finds that these proposed solutions will not work under conditions of high population growth. Instead, the increasing cost and complexity of adding new infrastructure in our already sprawling cities can only guarantee declining living standards and growing deficits.

Silver tsunami or silver lining? Why we should not fear an ageing population

With people living longer than ever and the baby-boomer generation reaching retirement age, some people worry that we will run short of workers and taxpayers. Media reports and political discourse about our ageing population often adopt a tone of panic.

But is this panic justified? This discussion paper untangles the facts from the myths, so that Australians can look afresh at the population ageing issue.

This paper addresses key questions, including:

- Will an ageing population blow government budgets?
- Will ageing cause a shortage of workers?
- Is high immigration and more population growth the answer?

A thorough analysis of the evidence finds that each of these concerns is unfounded. Far from being an economic calamity, our demographic maturity offers many advantages for improving social and environmental outcomes.

Population and climate change





Climate change is one of the greatest self-inflicted threats that human civilisation has ever faced. An unprecedented global effort is under way to change course to avert catastrophic outcomes – but doubts remain whether enough is being done, and quickly enough. In the flurry of activity and proposals, the role of human population size and growth is virtually ignored or actively rejected. This paper fills this gap with an in-depth review of the evidence. It explores questions such as:

- How is population a key driver of climate change?
- How has population growth contributed to Australia's greenhouse gas emissions?
- What are the implications of population growth for climate change mitigation and adaptation in poorer countries, compared to the more affluent countries?
- How does the greenhouse gas impact of having fewer children compare with other climate-friendly actions such as eating less meat or avoiding air travel?
- How can population policy be used as part of the actions to avoid catastrophic climate change?
- How will climate change affect the health, safety and growth of populations?
- Why has population been so often ignored in the policy prescriptions for combatting climate change?

This paper includes unique insights by lead author Ian Lowe, who has been deeply involved in climate policy and research in Australia from its very beginning in the 1980s.

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