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Sustainable Population Australia -- Newsletter

Patrons: The Hon Bob Carr • Professor Ian Lowe • Professor Tim Flannery • Katharine Betts • Dr Paul Collins

Population and Bushfires

by Jenny Goldie

It goes without saying that we Australians are reeling from the horrific bushfires that started months ago, well before the normal bushfire season. An area the size of Scotland burnt, more than 2000 thousand homes destroyed, 30 people and a billion animals dead. The prolonged drought that preceded the fires meant the countryside was tinder dry. Climate change clearly exacerbated the drought and was responsible for higher temperatures over spring and summer. The role of population growth, however, has largely been missing from public discussion.

In a letter published in the *Age* on January 25, SPA member Jennie Epstein wrote: "The recent fires are a wake-up call in so many ways. Not least of which is to again consider our level of population growth. In our current economy, each extra person results in the death and loss of habitat for thousands of plants and animals as we take up more land for housing and infrastructure, agriculture, water supply, timber etc. As global warming takes hold, our natural resources will further decline and our economic requirement for exponential growth will clash with the reality of living on one planet, which is not growing."

In an earlier article in the *Australian* on 6 January, Professor Henry Ergas referred to the terrifying fire at Durilgai, in Patrick White's book *The Tree of Man*. Prof Ergas wrote: "The fictional township White described was a small hamlet surrounded by the isolated properties of struggling farmers. Today Durilgai and its myriad counterparts would be thick with holiday homes and commercial properties nested in the glorious but unforgiving Australian bush. Little wonder the devastation inflicted by natural disasters has soared. Indeed, it is the incessant increases in the exposed population and property, rather than any rise in the frequency or severity of the hazards, that have caused the growth in the losses catastrophes impose, as Professor John McAneney, Australia's leading analyst of long-term trends in the risks arising from natural disasters and his colleague Dr. Ryan Compton from Risk Frontiers, have shown.



Orroral valley bushfiire near Canberra.
Photo Sithixay Dittavong, Canberra Times

"Even this season's losses, as widespread as they are, would likely be low by the standards of the great fires of earlier years were it not for the enormous expansion in the number of people ... in the most vulnerable areas. This is, in other words, a pyre we have largely built for ourselves on the most dangerous of foundations....And with the rising density of people and property, higher temperatures and stronger, more erratic winds making hazard reduction burning inherently more perilous, the accumulation of fuel loads will increase the likelihood of blazes that burn for months on end."

Prof Ergas may be underplaying the role of climate change in today's fires, but he makes a valid point, that the damages are far greater because of the expansion of people and property into vulnerable areas. This is also true of the wildfires (aka bushfires) that have afflicted the United States, particularly California, in recent years. In a 2017 paper published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS), Volker D Radeloff found that wildfire problems are most pronounced at the wildland-urban interface (WUI). This is the area where houses and wildland vegetation meet or intermingle and where wildfires pose the greatest risk to people due to the proximity of flammable vegetation. In the US, there had been enormous growth in housing within the perimeter of recent wildfires, with 286,000 houses in 2010 compared with 177,000 in 1990. (In this 20-year period, the population of the US grew by 60 million.) WUI areas are not only widespread in the US, but in other countries including Australia, the paper notes.

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Your money or your life? Putting wellbeing before GDP

by Richard Eckersley

In a speech in London last month, Iceland's Prime Minister Katrin Jakobsdottir added her country to those putting wellbeing before GDP in their budgets, calling for "an alternative future based on wellbeing and inclusive growth". Growth was considered not only essential but also positive, she said, "but we need to think about how it is achieved and what does it cost?".

Iceland has joined New Zealand and Scotland in a Wellbeing Economy Alliance to push a wellbeing agenda. In May this year, New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern announced what she said was the world's first "wellbeing budget", prioritising action on mental health, domestic violence and child poverty.

There are other signs of shifting political priorities. Commenting on the manifestos of the parties contesting the UK election, *Guardian* writer George Monbiot noted that an extraordinary feature of the election was that growth, for some parties, has almost become a dirty word: "it is mentioned only twice in the Labour manifesto, both times with qualifications." The Liberal Democrats had made a crucial breakthrough, he said, "arguing that GDP should no longer be a government's central objective. Instead, [governments] should focus on wellbeing." This was a policy the Greens had been urging for years.

Are these, at long last, signs that governments are getting the message that growth in GDP is a poor measure of national progress and people's welfare? If so, Australia can claim some credit. In 1997-98, CSIRO Australia, in collaboration with the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the university-based National Citizenship Project, organised a conference in Canberra and published a book called *Measuring progress: Is life getting better?*

The exercise was one of the most wide-ranging explorations of progress undertaken at the time. It spanned social, economic and environmental perspectives, and ranged from the personal scale to the global. It brought together leading researchers to discuss indicators of national performance, what they tell us about the quality and sustainability of life in Australia, and how they can be improved. It included responses by senior bureaucrats, academics and community representatives.

The ABS took the book and the idea to the OECD in Paris, which launched its own project: "Measuring the progress of societies". This interest spread to member countries, perhaps most influentially in France's Presidential Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, which reported in 2009 and prompted further work by the OECD (the OECD is also in the Wellbeing Economy Alliance). The ABS published its own reports, titled *Measures of Australia's progress*, from 2002, but the project was discontinued in 2014 because of funding cuts.

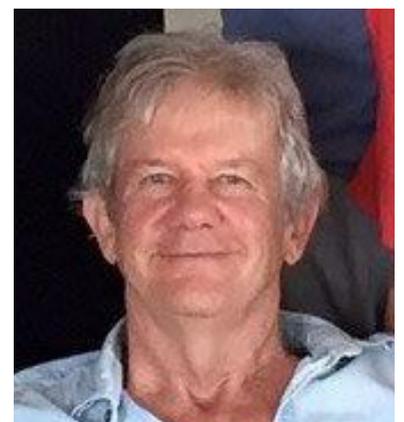
There were other elements of this development. For example, in the US, the organisation Redefining Progress created the Genuine Progress Indicator, which showed a widely divergent trend from GDP (its founder, Ted Halstead, was a guest speaker at the Canberra conference). Another element has been the growing interest in using measures of subjective wellbeing - happiness and life satisfaction - to measure and compare national performance.

I convened the CSIRO conference and edited and contributed to the book. I am also a co-author, with Professor Bob Cummins at Deakin University, of a national index of subjective wellbeing, the first of its kind in the world.

The work on progress indicators is all well and good, especially in challenging the political priority given to GDP. However, over the years I have grown more sceptical of the possibility of measuring, accurately and fully, the state of nations and the wellbeing of their people. The "holy grail" of a single index which accurately measures and compares how well nations are faring has proved elusive. The quest may be scientific folly.

Public perceptions of the future of the world or humanity (as distinct from their personal future) have been another dimension of my research. I am not aware of any progress indicators that reflect the depth of people's concern (which existed well before climate change gave it a tangible focus). Our politics and media fail utterly to come to grips with the scale and significance of this concern.

The current wave of global political unrest and protest is commonly attributed to growing inequality, corruption, austerity, thwarted expectations and climate change. But the reasons also go deeper, challenging the entire narrative of modernisation. British historian Kenneth Clark observed in his acclaimed BBC television series *Civilisation* that, however complex and solid civilisation seemed, it was really quite fragile. In the concluding episode, after reviewing thousands of years of the rise and fall of civilisations, he warns that "it's lack of confidence, more than anything else, that kills a civilisation. We can destroy ourselves by cynicism and disillusion just as effectively as by bombs".



Richard Eckersley

Dutch futurist Frederik Polak stresses, in his classic book *The Image of the Future*, the importance of the creation of positive images. He studied how images of the future have changed over 3000 years of Western history, and notes: "As long as a society's image of the future is positive and flourishing, the flower of culture is in full blossom. Once the image of the future begins to decay and lose its vitality, however, the culture cannot long survive."

These warnings seem frighteningly relevant to our times. The decay and disillusion may be commonly expressed in the language of today's mass media, politics and people's daily lives, but they will not be dispelled in that language. The roots of the decay are deeply existential, both in the physical sense of our survival and in the philosophical sense of the meaning and purpose of our lives.

The Climate Change Solution Scientists Have Been Overlooking

by Abigail Weinberg
Mother Jones

Overpopulation is a major contributor to climate change, but according to new research, a solution is lying in plain sight: increased access to effective contraceptives.

"Global climate change represents a grave threat to the future of human welfare and our natural environment," write doctors John Bongaarts and Régine Sitruk-Ware of the Population Council in New York in an article published in *BMJ Sexual & Reproductive Health*.

"The contentious ongoing policy debate about potential interventions focuses on switching to renewable energy sources and increasing energy use efficiency. But given the urgency of the problem and the lack of political will, other approaches to limit greenhouse gas emissions should be given higher priority. Improving access to effective contraception is one such policy that has thus far been largely ignored by the international climate community.

The authors claim that improved access to contraception could slow population growth and thereby reduce long-term greenhouse gas emissions globally by 40 percent or more. Bongaarts and Sitruk-Ware write that many married women—more than half in some countries—who do not wish to become pregnant still fail to use contraception due to barriers to access, high costs, and social stigma. Consequently, there are about 99 million unintended pregnancies worldwide each year. By 2100, Earth's population is expected to reach 10.9 billion people. (The current population is about 7.7 billion.)

My opening paragraphs are an upbeat assessment of a shift in the political winds. I fear the reality is different. The Conservatives' landslide victory in the UK, like the outcome of this year's Australian federal election and other global developments, seems to be a repudiation of the changes we need to make in rethinking human progress. We can only hope that the worse things get, the more likely we are to wake up.

Richard Eckersley is an independent researcher and writer on progress, wellbeing and the future. His work is available at richardeckersley.com.au. This article appeared in the Canberra Times on 2 January and is reprinted with the permission of the author.

As Paul Ehrlich, author of *The Population Bomb*, told Mother Jones in 2010, "overpopulation, combined with overconsumption, is the elephant in the room" in climate discussions. "We don't talk about overpopulation because of real fears from the past—of racism, eugenics, colonialism, forced sterilization, forced family planning, plus the fears from some of contraception, abortion, and sex. We don't really talk about overconsumption because of ignorance about the economics of overpopulation and the true ecological limits of Earth."

Bongaarts and Sitruk-Ware recommend that governments worldwide increase access to contraceptives by investing in family planning programs. They also encourage the research and development of new forms of contraception, and they suggest combatting social opposition to birth control through media campaigns.

"Wider distribution of contraceptives already on the market through greater investment in voluntary but underfunded family planning programmes is sufficient to raise contraceptive use substantially," they write. "This in turn would have a profound positive impact on human welfare, the climate and the environment."



Abigail Weinberg

Five myths about population, aging and environmental sustainability

by Jane O'Sullivan, Francesco Ricciardi, Susann Roth

For sustainable development, universal wellbeing should be the goal, rather than endless growth. Minimizing further growth in human populations is only part of the solution, but an essential part.

Climate change has been described as one of the greatest challenges of our time. But for many Asian countries, it is only the latest in a long list of environmental challenges. Biodiversity loss, depleting aquifers, eroding soils, polluted fisheries and urban smog, to name a few.

In all its forms, environmental damage has reached a level that threatens human civilisation. Climate change is the most obvious threat, and demands the most far-reaching responses, since it directly implicates the energy supplies on which industrialisation and globalisation have been based. But food security – our most vulnerable basic need – is threatened from many other angles in addition to climate change. The loss of pollinator insects could cause immense hardships, as could the exhaustion of groundwater needed for irrigation, or depletion of phosphorus fertiliser supplies.

In some cases, environmental damage is symptomatic of poverty. In others, it is a consequence of development. But a common factor is population growth, multiplying activities that were once sustainable to a scale that no longer is. So far, humanity has been largely successful in mitigating the consequences of population increase on human lives, but other species have paid the penalty.

There is a lot of misunderstanding surrounding population growth and environmental damage. Here are five myths that need to be busted in order for us to find solutions.

Myth 1: Technological innovation will solve environmental problems.

As Eric Sevareid famously said, “The chief cause of problems is solutions.” In many instances, they were solutions to population pressure. Fossil fuels initially replaced the dwindling wood supplies in Europe, but soon generated energy demand on a scale that has transformed the Earth’s atmosphere. Domestication of cattle and sheep turned vast areas of non-arable land into highly nutritious foods, but their methane production and land clearing for grazing now exacerbate climate change. Synthetic nitrogen fertilisers alleviated otherwise inevitable famines, but now pollute aquatic ecosystems. Long-distance trade in foods allowed local specialisation, further increasing productivity and enabling large cities to absorb surplus labour. But with it came plastic waste, ozone-depleting refrigerant gases, pesticides and the loss of crop biodiversity.

Myth 2: Population growth can’t be lessened directly without human rights abuses.

Through the 1960s to 1980s, there was global concern about the threats population pressure posed on poverty reduction and food security. Many countries implemented voluntary family planning programs in an effort to lower birth rates. Shaped by local cultures, these programs provided access to contraception, promoted spacing and limiting births, and addressed barriers to women’s autonomy. They were highly successful, especially in East and Southeast Asia, giving wom-

en control over their bodies and their lives, improving family health and finances, and enabling greater investment in each child. National economies were boosted, returning many times the investment made.

But in some instances, ill-conceived programs forced involuntary measures, including a brief program of forced vasectomies of fathers in India, and China’s one-child policy. The backlash against these violations undermined even voluntary family planning efforts, which lost funding and fertility declines stalled. A false narrative was promoted, linking all concerns about population growth with draconian “population control” measures enforced against the will of recipients.

Myth 3: Population growth is good for the economy.

This narrative is popular with those who benefit from abundant cheap labour and rising land prices, but both trends impoverish the majority. Rapidly-growing countries have failed to reduce the numbers in poverty, with the exception of oil-rich states. All developing countries that reduced fertility sufficiently have seen strong growth in incomes, but only after fertility fell well below three children per woman. “Development is the best contraception” was once the mantra, but history now shows that contraception was the best stimulus to development.

Joseph Chamie, former head of the United Nations Population Division, refers to population growth advocacy as a Ponzi scheme. Chamie says, “‘Economic growth requires population growth’ is the basic message that Ponzi demography want the public to swallow. No mention is made of the additional profits they reap and the extra costs the public bears.”

Myth 4: Population aging is a big problem that demands more population growth.

Chamie explains, “Like all Ponzi schemes, Ponzi demography is unsustainable. Among its primary tactics, it exploits the fear of population decline and ageing. Without a young and growing population, we are warned of becoming a nation facing financial ruin and a loss of national power.”

Yet in the real world, population aging has not caused the economic downturns anticipated, and some countries with declining populations are increasing household incomes strongly. Aging has not caused less employment, but less unemployment. Elderly citizens increase only up to a point, and con-



People crowd street in Kathmandu

tribute to society in many ways. Their needs can be properly managed with better health systems and pension programs, offset by reduced spending on infrastructure as the population stabilizes.

Myth 5: We can grow for ever.

When we consider the headwinds of environmental deterioration, there are many advantages to population decline and aging. Efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions would not be undone by rising energy needs. Increasing agricultural productivity can mean more land available for wildlife and carbon storage. Water resources would become more resilient to drought. Less concrete and steel would be needed, as our focus shifts from quantity to quality of the built environment. Greater contact with nature promotes health and mental well-being.

For sustainable development, we should aim for universal wellbeing, not endless growth. Minimising further growth in human populations is only part of the solution, but an essential part.

Published in [The Overpopulation Project](#) on 21 January 2020. A version of this article appeared on the [Asian Development Bank blog](#), December 2019. Dr Jane O'Sullivan is a member of SPA's national executive and the Queensland branch president.

Two proposals

SPA's national executive has endorsed two proposals being strongly pushed by Rob Harding, communication manager of NumbersUSA.

1) A United Nations Framework Convention on Population Growth (UNFCPG)

Rob writes:

"You may be interested to know that there is a movement to set up a United Nations Framework Convention on Population

Growth – one akin to the Paris Agreement for climate change with Nationally Determined Contributions (NDCs) in pursuit of a sustainable population in every country.

As we are all aware, an equitable approach to population stability requires a global-based approach built on consensus, cooperation and empowerment. This proposal is one significant step towards achieving the vision, which aligns with the call to action included in the World Scientists' Warning of a Climate Emergency: "Still increasing by roughly 80 million people per year, or more than 200,000 per day, the world population must be stabilized—and, ideally, gradually reduced—within a framework that ensures social integrity."

2) An 18th Sustainable Development Goal to reduce population growth

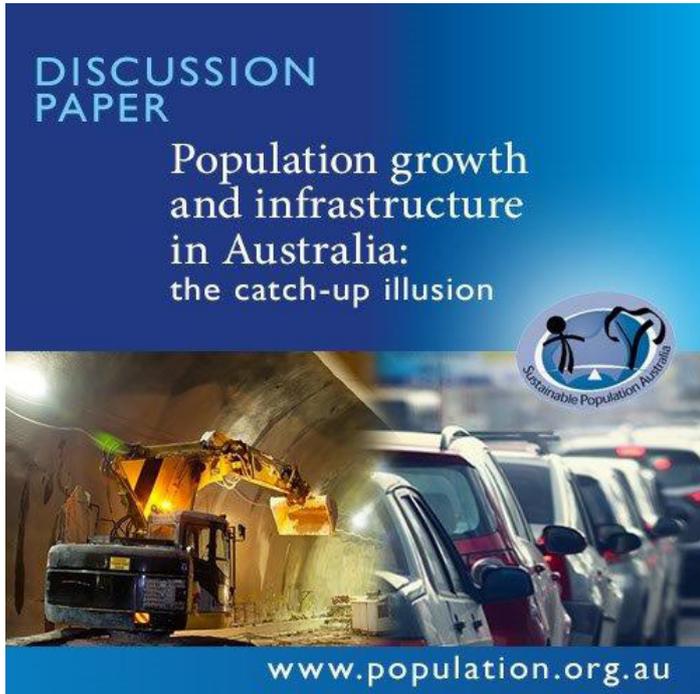
Frank Götmark, professor of animal ecology and conservation biology at the University of Gothenburg and head of the Overpopulation Project, and Robin Maynard, director of Population Matters, published their commentary, "The World and the UN Must Reduce Population Growth," two weeks before the 2019 Summit on the UN's Sustainable Development Goals. They urged global leaders and the UN to acknowledge increasing global population as a serious issue and take action to reduce population growth.

"...The SDGs, which aim 'to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all,' are commendable, and summarize the kind of world many of us wish to see in 2030. But if this vision is to have any chance of materializing, governments must now add an 18th goal: 'Dampen population growth.' ... More specifically, an additional SDG to dampen population growth would promote funding for voluntary, rights-based family planning. This approach has a proven track record of success, not only in reducing births rapidly, but also in advancing the empowerment of women and spurring economic progress. No coercive 'population control' measures are needed. Rather, wider awareness of the linkage between family size and ecological sustainability can help parents recognize the benefits of having fewer children..."



18th SDG

SPA launches its first discussion paper



Infrastructure paper

On 26 November, former NSW Premier, former federal Foreign Minister and a current SPA Patron, Hon Bob Carr, launched the first of SPA's discussion papers at the Mitchell Library in Sydney. The paper was called "Population growth and Infrastructure in Australia: the catch-up illusion". SPA had commissioned Melbourne-based contributor and writer for Macrobusiness, Leith van Onselen, to write the paper, and he flew up for the launch.

In his address, Leith said Australia's infrastructure problem was an impossible challenge. Nobody wanted to discuss the "elephant in the room" - population. And yet, he said, population was the 'everything' issue affecting how long you spend stuck in traffic; whether you get a seat on public transport; whether you can find a reasonably sized home a decent commute from work; your ability to get a wage increase; whether you can water your garden, and the health of the natural environment.

"Over the past 15 years," Leith said, "immigration has run at historically high levels. If these levels are maintained we will have 42 million people by 2042 compared to 24 million if we had zero net migration."

Since 2003, Australia's population growth has been two and a half times of that of the OECD, and the highest amongst English-speaking countries - the 'Anglosphere'. By 2066, Sydney and Melbourne will each have populations of around ten million people, which is what the population of the whole of Australia was in 1960. By 2057, only a quarter of Sydney dwellings will have back yards and apartments will comprise one half (up from 30 per cent) of all housing stock.

According to Leith, infrastructure is failing to keep up with such rapid growth. He quoted Engineers Australia (2019) who said: "More people mean more cars on the road. It means more requirement for water and sewerage, telecommunications and energy. And yet, at the time that the population has been rising, infrastructure trends are going down..."

Indeed, Infrastructure Australia (2018) said that by 2047 when Sydney's population was expected to be 7.4 million, Sydney dwellers will have worse road congestion, longer commute times, reduced access to jobs, schools, hospital and green space, all regardless of whether Sydney builds up or out.

Meanwhile, Sydney's water supply is falling 50 per cent faster than during the Millennial drought, largely because there are one million more people than in 2006. Where will the water come from when there are not 5.5 million, but 10 million people? Answer: from a battery of energy-intensive desalination plants. Water from desal plants costs about four times that from traditional dam water. This will quadruple household water bills in real terms over the next 50 years.

"It took Sydney 213 years to reach a population of 3.9 million in 2001," Leith said. "Yet the official medium projection by the ABS has Sydney ballooning to roughly 2.5 times that number of people (i.e. to 9.7 million) in only 65 years!"

"We are only 18 years along this path, and already the lived experience is bleak. Congested roads, trains, schools and hospitals; high-rise slums; and rising cost of living (e.g. tolls and housing).

"A dystopian future awaits future generations unless we slash immigration and control population growth," he concluded.

The Infrastructure discussion paper can be found at <http://population.org.au/publications/discussion-papers/infrastructure>

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Infrastructure paper launch.

(L to R) Hon Bob Carr, Hon Sandra Kanck, Leith van Onselen

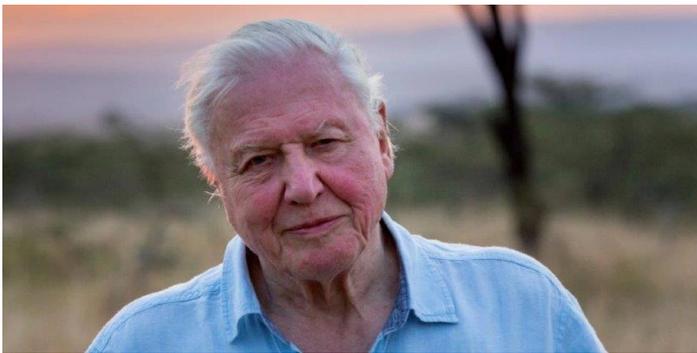
Help Shape Australia's Aid Program!

The Government is currently undertaking a review of Australia's international development policy, and has requested interested people to make submissions.

It is important that the review receives unique submissions from concerned individuals as well as organisations like Sustainable Population Australia, which will stress the importance of family planning as well as education for girls and other measures that help stabilise population numbers.

SPA encourages everyone who is interested in international development to make a submission directly as an individual.

Email your submission directly to development.submissions@dfat.gov.au by 14 February 2020. Format limited to five pages but even a one-page submission is enough.



Attenborough says humans overrun the world

Herald Sun, January 16, 2020

Sir David Attenborough has warned that "human beings have overrun the world" in a trailer for his new film.

The feature-length documentary, titled *David Attenborough: A Life on Our Planet*, looks back on the defining moments of his life and the environmental devastation that has taken place during that time.

As well as highlighting some of the issues that climate change poses, he also explores some of the potential solutions.

In the trailer, the veteran broadcaster, 93, said: "I've had the most extraordinary life.

"It is only now that I appreciate how extraordinary.

"The living world is a unique and spectacular marvel, yet the way we humans live on earth is sending it into a decline.

"Human beings have overrun the world. We're replacing the wild with the tame.

"This film is my witness statement and my vision of the future."

"One of Australia's most significant public policy challenges is to overcome the systemic degradation of Australia's land, water and marine resources and reverse the ongoing loss of biodiversity, whilst at the same time managing new pressures arising from a growing population and increasing global demand for more food, fibre, energy and minerals."

- *Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists*

John Coulter wins life-time achiever award

Former SPA president and former South Australian Senator, Dr John Coulter, has been honoured for decades of advocacy for environmental conservation and sustainability. He received a Conservation SA Lifetime Achievers Award at the 2019 SA Environmental Awards in November. He told the Mt Barker Courier that a changing climate and overpopulation were all symptoms of the same thing: a world being exploited for perceived economic gain.

"Without a healthy environment," he said, "we cease to exist. Our growing population continues to exploit our finite natural resources – we've got more people than ever before demanding more of a reducing amount of natural resources...

"There's no such thing as limitless growth and we know that oil, coal and urban sprawl are ruining our environment. I do fear we have gone too far and I believe we can't repair the damage that's been done.

"But I believe we can change ... we just need our decision-makers in governments to act on these issues as quickly as the general population generally wants them to."



John Coulter with his award. Photo A. Kanck

Growth: From Microorganisms to Megacities

by Vaclav Smil
MIT Press, 2019

Reviewed by Jonathan Miller

Did you know that wandering albatross chicks are up to 1.5 times heavier than their parents? Or that there is no significant difference between the economic performances of republics and monarchies? These are just two of the intriguing facts in Vaclav Smil's latest book, *Growth: From Microorganisms to Megacities*.

Czech-Canadian academic, Vaclav Smil, is one of the world's experts on energy and has been named as one of the Top 100 Global Thinkers.

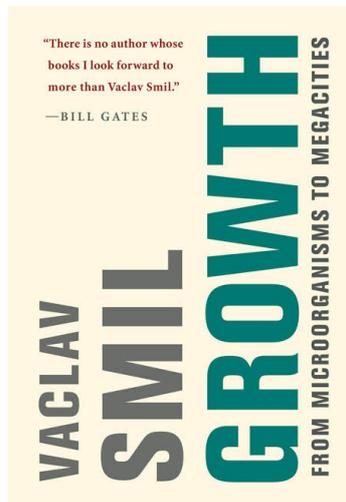
Growth is striking for its level of ambition, traversing an extraordinary sweep of topics: starting with microorganisms, moving to plants and animals, before exploring trends in human energy use and the history of machines, devices, buildings and infrastructure. The final two chapters are most relevant to SPA, considering populations and economies, as well as what comes after growth.

In his section on population, Smil starts with an account of the growth of the global human numbers over the last two million years. *Growth* then moves to assessing the causes and effects of demographic transition (changing death rates and birth rates) and total fertility rates. *Growth* then discusses possible future population trends, highlighting that the main uncertainty is future fertility rates, and the global significance of those rates in sub-Saharan Africa. Smil sensibly makes no firm predictions as to future global population numbers, but does discuss Earth's biophysical constraints on sustainable population levels.

In considering what comes after growth, Smil focuses on the implications for nations of low fertility rates. He particularly discusses Japan, concluding that its infrastructure, health care, food production and global influence will be impacted by its declining population. Readers might criticise Smil's emphasis on age dependency, but he does not specifically identify it as a problem to be 'fixed'.

Smil's treatment is arguably stronger for economies than population. He starts by setting out the dramatic expansion in human economic use of energy, which has increased almost twenty-fold since 1800. Smil then considers the importance of energy inputs and fertilisers to boosting food production, noting that 'anthropogenic' energy (essentially fossil fuels) inputs to farming increased by a factor of 130 over the twentieth century.

Growth also covers trends in material economic inputs, particularly steel and cement. Smil makes the point that while many industrial processes have become more efficient, reduced prices have led to greater demands for consumer goods, as Jevon's paradox would predict. He argues there



has been no absolute 'dematerialisation' on a macro level. Smil later uses a paper lead-authored by former SPA president, James Ward, to demonstrate that GDP growth cannot be decoupled (long-term) from growth in material and energy use.

Possibly the most interesting part of Smil's treatment of economies canvasses the sources of economic growth. He supports the argument that the 'second industrial revolution' from 1870 - 1900 (with the introduction of internal combustion engines, running water, oil extraction and chemical industries) was more consequential to economic growth than the start of the industrial revolution or the digital revolution. Smil goes on to consider the positive effects of

the demographic transition on national economic performance: the demographic dividend.

Those hoping to find a strong position on population will be disappointed; Smil is his own man, often contrarian, and would doubtless vigorously resist co-option into any activist movement. On most matters, Smil retains the scientist's measured approach and avoids definitive statements on contentious topics. He is, however, scathing of poorly constructed arguments and flawed methodologies. For example, he criticises the Club of Rome's *Limits to Growth* algorithms for using what he considers are meaningless input variables.

Smil also brings a physicist's critical eye to neoclassical economics, rehearsing common critiques of GDP as an indicator of national wellbeing. He also criticises neoclassical economics for its failure to recognise the importance of energy inputs and material flows to economic activity, stressing the impossibility of ongoing economic growth. He similarly points out the long-term material impediments to implementing a circular economy,

Smil works his way slowly to his conclusion as he focuses on the global environmental effects of human economic activity. He does not explicitly predict the collapse of the natural environment or civilisations, or the nature or timing of disruptions. He does, however, firmly assert that the pursuit of economic growth, extending consumerism and treating the biosphere as merely exploitable resources "must change in radical ways". Smil concludes that "The long-term survival of our civilization cannot be assured without setting...(economic) limits (at) the planetary scale."

While *Growth* is not a polemical text, it does contain useful material for the activist. Beyond that, it is a fascinating read.

On Fire: the burning case for a Green New Deal

by Naomi Klein

Allen Lane, 2019, 309pp

Reviewed by Stephen Williams

This is a collection of 16 of Naomi Klein's essays, mostly focused on climate change, arranged chronologically from 2010 to 2019. They form a narrative that explains the thinking that led her to co-found The Leap organisation in Canada around 2015 and then focus on the Green New Deal (GND) in the US.

In sum, the GND is a socialist agenda aimed at making every sector of an economy carbon neutral as quickly as possible, or at least by 2050 in line with the IPCC and Paris climate targets. Also, it focuses on socio-economic change that unsurprisingly seeks to vastly reduce wealth inequality and raise the wellbeing of the underprivileged.

What Klein's approach lacks is a science-based approach to sustainability that would quantify the safe operating space for humanity on a finite planet.

Klein was raised in Canada after her parents fled the USA to avoid the Vietnam War draft. As a result she holds both US and Canadian passports, but seems to base herself in the US. She is a democratic socialist and a strong supporter of presidential hopeful Bernie Sanders: she wants urgent, transformative action, not the gradualism of the Democratic centrists.

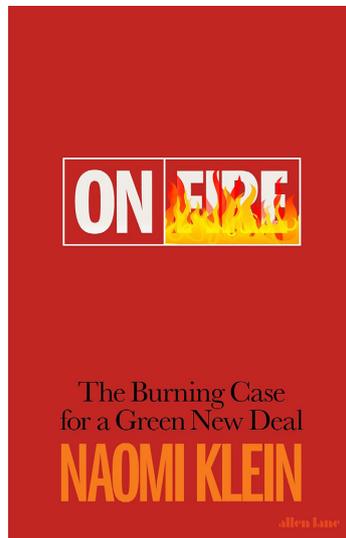
There is much to like in Klein's approach: she recognises the climate emergency; she is a champion of the underdog and human rights; she understands much of the evil in neoliberalism; and she sees the horror of growing wealth inequality. But most of that is stating the obvious.

Klein is neither scientist nor economist nor philosopher. Whether that helps or hinders, it is hard to say, but it is not hard to find gaps in her thinking – gaps that are common to most GND advocates.

In particular, she is as good as silent on overpopulation, family planning and sexual health, while thinking she is an expert on the climate emergency. Sound familiar? For instance, she ignores the well-known 'World Scientists' Warning to Humanity' that puts population issues front and centre, just as she ignores Project Drawdown that puts family planning in its top-10 actions to reduce greenhouse pollution.

Yet you will find plenty on refugees and migrants, more often than not conflating the two groups as if they were identical.

I do not criticise Klein for her empathy with the poor and marginalised, nor for her highlighting the sins of colo-



nialism and ongoing covert colonialism. In some ways this is Klein at her best. But there is clearly a number of blind spots in her thinking that we in the environment movement are all too familiar with.

Linked to this, Klein fails to explore the issue of ecological footprinting and overshoot, and so does not turn her mind to carrying capacity and sustainability in any robust way. She offers hope, as long as we roll up our sleeves, get organised at the community level, demand 100% renewable energy, and redistribute wealth. She says there will be lots of green jobs with big pay packets, echoing Democratic congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez.

On economics Klein is also unimpressive. While not pretending any real expertise,

she sides with the standard approach where monetary sovereign governments like the US still face a budget constraint, so they need the taxes of the rich to fund things. OK, many people still believe that. But Klein has worked closely with Ocasio-Cortez, and cannot plead ignorance of the latter's advocacy of modern monetary theory (MMT).

MMT is rocking the very foundations of mainstream macroeconomics. Klein does mention in passing that Ocasio-Cortez has a different approach to economics, but the paragraph in question is handled maladroitly to the point of being misleading. It is as if Klein has too much baggage on the issue of 'pay for' and doesn't want to scare the horses. But she does her readers no favours by not informing them of this extremely important debate that promises nothing less than a paradigm shift.

So, while worthy of a read, the book's failings can be summed up as follows:

1. Nothing on population issues
2. Nothing robust on overshoot or steady-state economics
3. No mention of important debates in economics (MMT vs neoclassical)
4. A focus on climate change at the expense of other environmental crises
5. A dismissal of human psychology as a cause of, or factor in, the trashing of the planet.

Klein sees herself as a radical and says the Ocasio-Cortez version of the GND is too weak. Yet I say Klein is not radical enough and needs to do a lot more research on carrying capacity and overshoot – and the formidable task of downsizing that the world faces.

Branch Reports

WA

The Conservation Council WA AGM and Conference was attended by Warwick Boardmen, our SEC/Treasurer, and a stall was manned by John Massam and myself (see picture). Traffic was slow, though we still managed to have some conversations. Wearing our Stop @ 2 badge we handed out Dick Smith books into which I had put a copy of the advert we had run in a regional newspaper. At least there weren't any people arguing against us, as was the case in the previous year. At the CCWA AGM and Conference, Dr Louise Duxbury gave an interesting talk about her town of Denmark, (on our south coast, wet area usually), where water supply and quality is in a critical state. Population growth is not required there!

We have booked a stall for the CCWA's Eco Fest event at Hyde Park in March.



John Massam and Judith Odgaard at CCWA AGM

Warwick & I submitted an appeal against the decision of the EPA to allow the Yanchep rail extension that would necessitate approximately 6,500 ha being cleared. EPA has said that it is concerned about that and expects planning authorities to ensure there is minimal impact (wow!). Warwick met with the Appeals Convener (AC) and argued that planning authorities take EPA approval as given when land is zoned for development. The AC said that the appeal was strictly about the development itself, not on the consequences!!

Similarly, not directly dealing with pop. growth, committee member Dr Robin Collin has written to German conglomerate Siemens (contract to deliver signalling systems for the rail line) requesting that they please consider their Australian business dealings, in particular, their association with businesses such as Adani in promoting the construction of new coal mining in the Carmichael basin.

Progress, rather too slowly, is being made re production of Stop @ 2 badges complete with stork.

Judith Odgaard

NSW

Recent Workshop, 9 November

NSW Branch held an interactive workshop, *Conversations for Change* on Saturday, 9 November in Sydney. The session aimed to help members talk with confidence about population in ordinary, everyday conversations. The emphasis was on connecting with the other person through common ground and shared values, and provided the opportunity for practice. As well as covering myths and fallacies and communication techniques, the workshop was a great opportunity to meet other SPA members. A USB 'resource kit' with background material, research papers and videos, as well as a summary brochure, *We Need to Talk About Population* were provided to participants.

Some words from participants in feedback were: *a great workshop - very relaxed and interactive - loads of useful information - inspirational - friendly and supportive.*

Planning for Public Forum, 20 June

We are currently working on a public forum to be held on June 20, halfway between World Environment Day (June 5) and World Population Day (July 11). The working title is: *Sustainability, Population and Quality of Life: living in sync with the planet.*

The event will address a range of issues related to sustainability of the biosphere and how this relates to human activity, now and in the future. Dr Katharine Betts, vice-president of The Australian Population Research Institute and SPA patron, has kindly agreed to present, and we are currently talking to potential speakers from academia, industry and the political sphere. Issues we aim to cover include: the ageing population fallacy, measuring economic growth, ecological services, human population and the need to protect nature, and political barriers to addressing population issues.

We also want to offer hope and inspire action, and in keeping with these latter goals, attendees will be given a *How to Live Sustainably* guide.

Kay Dunne

SA

In the last Bulletin the SA group reported on the course it had run for the University of the Third Age on 'A Sustainable SA'. Since then the committee has met to consider how it might create a presence at local community events, and has received the ok from organisers of one market to participate. Members willing to create materials and help run a stall please contact the state committee.

The SA branch has also taken on organising the venue and public speaker for the national SPA AGM in Adelaide on April 18, and has had several meetings on this task. An excellent venue at UniSA has been booked, and a speaker approached.

Peter Martin

QLD

The Queensland Branch AGM was deferred from November to 16 December, to accommodate our guest speaker, LNP Senator Gerard Rennick. Unfortunately, Senator Rennick failed to appear on that date. He was sorry to have missed it, and we hope to reschedule him to our 16 March meeting.

We nevertheless held a very successful AGM, with members attending from Gold Coast, Sunshine Coast and even Wide Bay, and three new members joining our committee: Edward Smith, Jackie Poetzscher and John Steley. Tony Matta continues as our Treasurer, and Jane O'Sullivan as branch president. Members were also forthcoming with ideas for activities next year, including more venues for stalls, and using the new SPA Discussion Paper on Infrastructure as a basis for visiting MPs to discuss impacts of population growth. We look forward to these and other new activities throughout 2020.

Jane O'Sullivan

VIC/TAS

The new VicTas committee met for the first time following the AGM in mid-January, bringing new idea and energy into a brave new decade.

Our new president Dr Graeme Dennerstein brings with him decades of direct experience as an obstetrician and gynaecologist with a long association with family planning. As such, Graeme is keen combine his experience with his position as branch President to make an impact on fertility and family planning globally. At time of writing, he is liaising and meeting with ACF and Doctors for the Environment Australia.

In late February, The USA film '8 Billion Angels' will be screened in Melbourne for the Transition Films festival. At this stage the

event will be presented by SPA and the committee are planning a social catch up for members around the screening. We are also anticipating the launch of the Ageing Discussion paper in Melbourne over the next few months.

Michael Bayliss

ACT

The ACT Branch has held monthly meetings over the last quarter with vigorous debate about population and immigration issues and how our organisation might best influence public opinion. In this regard, a number of our members continue to submit well informed and researched letters to the editor of the *Canberra Times*.

We conducted a public seminar in December where Dr Chris Mc Murray, a demographer, formerly from ANU, gave an excellent presentation on the topic: 'Pacific population in the post-colonial era: Where now?'

Dr McMurray delivered a brief review of the impacts of colonialism that she had discussed at a SPA AGM two years ago. She then outlined likely responses to increasing population pressure, including the potential for legal and illegal Polynesian and Melanesian migration to Australia. Her address prompted many questions which illustrated the depth of interest in her topic.

In very recent times, our long-serving former President, Nick Ware was admitted to Calvary Hospital with ongoing health issues. He has recently been discharged from Calvary hospital, and as an interim measure he has been transferred to a sub-acute care rehab ward in the new University of Canberra Hospital. This is good news and we wish Nick a full recovery so that he can return to his home in the foreseeable future.

Colin Lyons

Communications Manager's Report

My main focus recently has been in promoting SPA's 'Stop At Two' Campaign. Our latest video 'Talking Heads: Choosing to Have Children ... or not' has been released since early January and has so far attracted nearly 4000 online views. The video includes interviewees from all across Australia with their own unique views on the issue.

Later this year, I am planning on hosting screening of our 'Stop At 2' campaign videos, along with a new documentary from the USA on this very topic. This will hopefully be screened across several capital cities, so watch this space!

Speaking of documentaries, the Melbourne Transition Film Festival will be screening '8 Billion Angels' in late February. Filmed in USA by the team from 'Earth Overshoot', I have been invited to present and introduce this beautifully cinematic, powerful film on overpopulation at the festival. This will be a great way to introduce a broader audience to the issue of population and also the work of SPA.

I assisted the Membership and Marketing team around the Infrastructure discussion paper launch late last year. I am pleased to share that the discussion paper has resulted in over nearly 1500 visits to our website, in addition to radio interviews on the issue and an exclusive from popular columnist Ross Gittins. The media response to our paper continues, with a recent write up in Online Opinion.

I liaise regularly with colleagues from overseas. These include João Abegão from Portugal, who SPA sponsored at the COP25 in Madrid. He was part of a panel on population that has attracted nearly 12 000 views. Additionally, I am assisting Rob Harding from Numbers USA to rally international interest for a UN proposal on a global approach to population. You can find out more about these projects on our website

Michael Bayliss



Talking Heads

Cont. Population and Bushfires

In his 2017 book *Megafire*, Michael Kodas cites four distinct causes of megafires: climate change, mismanaged forests, human activities in wilderness areas such as shooting, trail-bike riding and, most importantly, the incursion of homes, often palatial. One in three US residences - 44 million - are now in the WUI.

Here in Australia there are calls to return to Aboriginal traditional methods of fire control – cool, mosaic burning of the landscape to keep down the undergrowth. Bill Gammage's book *The Greatest Estate on Earth* has been very influential in this regard. Aboriginal society collapsed so soon after European colonisation, however, that no-one really knows what they did. And now the landscape has changed significantly with farms, houses and fences across the non-arid parts of the countryside. Meanwhile, the population has grown from less than a million in 1788 to 25 million today. If we are to return to Aboriginal fire-control methods, then perhaps we need the same uncluttered landscape. That is hardly a viable option, however, as we need farms to feed people and there are too many of us now to be fed by hunter-gatherer means.

This summer has given us a portent of the future. It is not looking good. If we are to reduce the risk of bushfire, we have to work on a number of fronts, not least mitigating climate change. This must go hand in hand, however, with curbing population growth and discouraging people from building in vulnerable areas.

Notice of 2020 SPA AGM

The 2020 Annual General Meeting of Sustainable Population Australia will be held at **11am on Saturday 18th April 2020 at the Bradley Forum, University of S.A, West Campus, Adelaide.**

All members are welcome to attend. Members will receive separate notices calling for nominations for the national executive and proxy forms for the proposed constitutional amendments.

Website: www.population.org.au

The SPA newsletter is now published every four months: in February, May, August and November. Members are welcome to submit material to the editor, to be published at the editor's discretion.

Newsletter editor: Jenny Goldie
editor@population.org.au.

Letters to editor welcome but 300 words maximum and in electronic form!

Membership applications and renewals should be done via the SPA website or sent to the national office. General inquiries should also go to the national office.

SPA national office

PO Box 85, Deakin West ACT 2600
phone: 0434 962 305
email: info@population.org.au

SPA national office bearers

President: Sandra Kanck | (08) 8336 4114
president@population.org.au

Vice-president: Jenny Goldie | 0401 921 453
vp@population.org.au

Meetings secretary: Nola Stewart | (02) 9686 3542
meetingsecretary@population.org.au

Treasurer: Tony Matta | treasurer@population.org.au

Committee: John Coulter | Jane O'Sullivan | Alan Jones
Greg Dunstone

Webmaster: Alex Geppert

webmaster@population.org.au

Membership officer: Andrew Verlei
membership@population.org.au

Trustees of the Population Fund

Tony Matta | Sandra Kanck | Jenny Goldie

Regional branches

NSW President: Graham Wood

nsw@population.org.au

WA President: Judith Odgaard | 0477 002 821

wa@population.org.au

VIC/TAS President: Graeme Dennerstein

vic@population.org.au

ACT President: Colin Lyons | 0434 531 449

act@population.org.au

QLD President: Jane O'Sullivan | (07) 3379 8090

qld@population.org.au

SA/NT President: Peter Martin

sa@population.org.au

Disclaimer

While every effort has been made to ensure the reliability of the information contained in this newsletter, the opinions expressed are those of the various authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinion of either SPA or the editor.