



No. 146, February 2022

Sustainable Population Australia -- Newsletter

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

Conference on sustainable agriculture to go ahead

It has been on again-off again for two and a half years because of Covid, but the Fenner Conference – Making Australian agriculture sustainable – *will* be held in March, come lockdown or not. This time, there will be no deferral. If Covid persists, we will hold the conference on-line. Fortunately, Covid cases in the ACT have peaked and we can but hope that we will be free to gather at the Shine Dome in Canberra on March 17 and 18.

SPA was given the rights to hold the conference back in 2019 by the Academy of Science. An amazing collection of speakers, including farmers and academics, agreed to speak and they are all still keen to do so. We have another excellent line-up of people to chair sessions, all women apart from our Patron Ian Lowe who will also sum up the conference.

Why is a population organisation holding a conference on agriculture? Clearly, there is a close nexus between food and the number of people that the Earth can support. There is a great deal of evidence that many current agricultural practices are unsustainable and need to change, particularly in light of climate change. Food production has to be sustainable if we are not to degrade the ecosystem services on which we all depend.

Regenerative agriculture provides many solutions and some speakers will focus on that. The role of soil is critical so we include speakers on biochar and dung beetles amongst other soil experts.

A number of our speakers have published books in the past few months, notably Matthew Evans "Soil", Gabrielle Chan's "Why you should give a F*ck about farming" and Nicole Chalmer's "Ecoagriculture for a sustainable food future."



Our potential speaker for the conference dinner, WA Agriculture Minister Alannah MacTiernan, may be held back by Western Australian border closures, but rest assured we will find an equally informative speaker should she not make it.

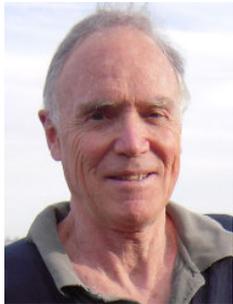
Please register for this conference at the web-site www.sustainableag.org.au. The catering, as was the case when we hosted the 2013 Fenner conference, will be excellent. (One person who attended that conference said three months later: "I loved the conference, the food, the speakers, the food, the people, the food...") In-person registration is \$200 and concession \$150 with on-line registrations \$40 per day. Please come and let your friends know, not least those on farms.

The conference is being co-organised with Regenerate Earth and the Frank Fenner Foundation though SPA was the initiator. Stephen Curtain and Rod Taylor have provided invaluable help in providing on-line, video and website expertise. JG



Nature's right: a world with limits, to fossil fuels and population

by Oliver Howes

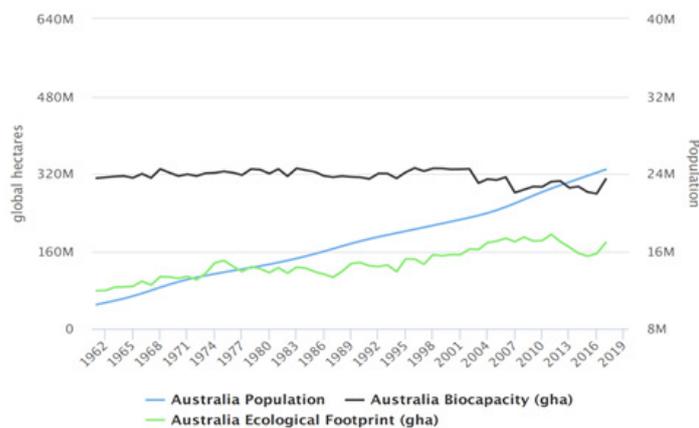


Oliver Howes

First, a simple question: how much of the world would you leave to nature?

More than three-quarters of all nations, including all the big and developed economies, are in a state of biocapacity deficit, taking more from their ecologies than their territories regenerate.

Australia is one of the luckiest of those comparatively few countries with remaining biocapacity reserves, but for how long? In the graph below, the black line is the biocapacity — the amount of living matter Australia's ecosystems can regenerate.



Australian population, ecological footprint and biocapacity. (Global Footprint Network, 2021 National Footprint and Biocapacity Accounts)

Between 1961 and 2017, Australia's population (the blue line) increased by 233 per cent, from 10.4 million people to 24.5 million. Australia's Ecological Footprint of consumption (the green line) increased with it, eating away at the biocapacity reserve.

The Ecological Footprint metric is the global hectare or gha, a measure of land area which varies according to an area's biocapacity, so that the gha has a constant yield around the world. It is uniquely useful in being a single metric reporting on all aspects of ecosystem services.

Climate change had been drying out the forests of the east coast and Western Australia. Then came 2019, Australia's hottest year on record, and the Black Summer bushfires erupted. The nation's biocapacity of 296 million global hectares was reduced to 153 gha, less than the people's 160 gha Ecological Footprint of consumption.

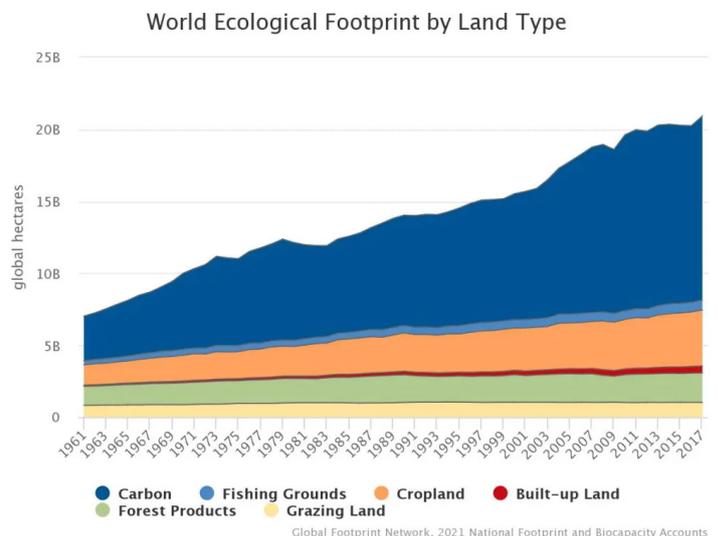
David Lin, chief science officer of Global Footprint Network (GFN), says the think tank "calculated the impact of last summer's devastating wildfires in Australia. Our research found that Australia's biocapacity reserve turned

into deficit for that year."

Setting aside the human loss, billions of animals were incinerated. GFN's Professor Pat Hunscom comments: "This abrupt change from having a large biocapacity to running a biocapacity deficit is a tragedy. But the even bigger tragedy is the loss of biodiversity due to the destruction of mature ecosystems which were habitat to many unique species."

The Ecological Footprint and Biocapacity accounts were created in the 1990s by Professor William Rees and Mathis Wackernagel at the University of British Columbia, Canada. The framework was central to Wackernagel's founding of the Global Footprint Network in 2003. It answers the question: "How much nature do we have, and how much do we use?"

GFN's annual National Footprint and Biocapacity Accounts derive from all nations' datasets, international trade models and bodies such as the United Nations Environment Program and the International Union for the Conservation of Nature. The datasets go back as far as 1961, revealing important trends. The Ecological Footprint is easily the most well-known of many sustainability measures. It informs campaigns by WWF, the world's largest environment group, and its international Earth Overshoot Day.

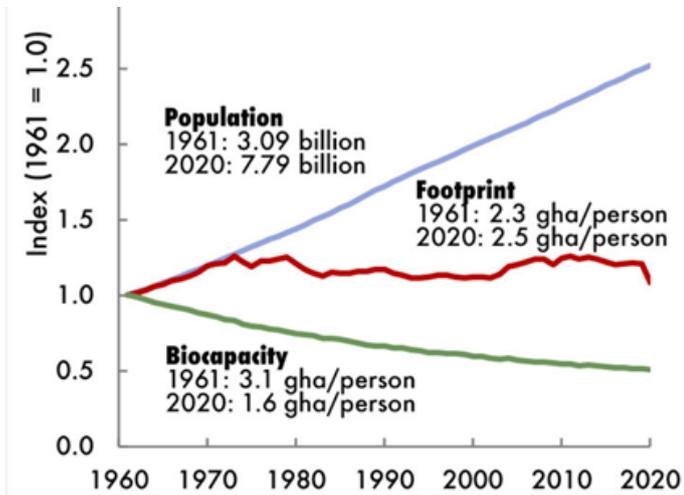


Over the period 1961–2017 the carbon, or greenhouse gas, footprint has grown enormously to 60 per cent of the world ecological footprint. The energy transition plus carbon sequestration in soil and sea will bring this down, hard as it may be.

But reductions in the remaining 40 per cent of the footprint which provides all of humanity's ecosystem services on land and water will be harder. It's hard even to frame the problem in a way which people will accept, because the problem is ourselves, our population number and our way of life — even our beliefs. In a world

which we have pushed into ecological deficit, the problem ranges humanity against biodiversity. And to date, we have failed to meet all internationally agreed biodiversity goals.

In 2020, Wackernagel published "[Shifting the Population Debate: Ending Overshoot, by Design and Not Disaster](#)".



Population, per person footprint and per person biocapacity trends for the world. (Image: Global Footprint Network)

Between 1961 and 2017, world population increased by 252 per cent. Over this time, Ecological Footprint per capita increased only slightly, but biocapacity per capita decreased by nearly half. Most of this fall in biocapacity was caused by the population increase, with attendant inequalities of consumption.

Wackernagel: "Global Footprint Network's approach is consistent with the one proposed by Holdren, Ehrlich and Ehrlich which they call IPAT" (the concept that environmental Impact equals Population x Affluence x Technology.) "The Ecological Footprint translates this concept into real numbers."

"Humanity currently demands 56 per cent more from our planet than its ecosystems can renew. To maintain 85 per cent of the world's biodiversity, human demand can only use half of what the planet can provide."

Arguing the urgency of reducing population, Wackernagel comments: "Through forward-looking decisions, we can turn around natural resource consumption trends while improving quality of life ... it has some of the highest, cost-effective long-term benefits, not just for the environment, but for health and education outcomes, tightly linked to equal rights for all people independent of sex, gender, sexual orientation, age etc., which we at Global Footprint Network would advocate for even if it had no environmental benefit.

"It's time to infuse some empowering facts into the public [population] debate ... There is a humane choice whether there will be 4 or 11 billion people sharing our planet in 2100."

Critics of the Ecological Footprint method have said that it fails to reveal environmental problems such as soil de-

pletion and species extinction threats. In fact, the Global Footprint Network is not an in-field environment organisation; what it provides is environmental accounting using many sources of big data. GFN admits that there are limitations, but a recent alliance with York University Ecological Initiative in Toronto, and their establishment in 2020 of FoDaFo (Footprint Data Foundation) provides any researcher with increasingly rich environmental data from all nations, free of charge.

Environmental accounting is, or should be, the essence of the population debate — an enquiry into what is best for all humans and the planet. But, says Wackernagel, it can be roadblocked by:

- Morally proscriptive, ideological, religious or polarising arguments
- Horrific past experiences of "eugenic" policies including forced sterilisation
- Economic fear that without expanding populations there will be no wealth and security
- A singular focus on abortion
- Accusations of racism.

These attitudes may be especially corrosive in North America, but the Australian population debate has also had its problems, especially with the elite growth-at-all-costs boosters in politics, business and the media.

Shamefully, even some large environment groups have avoided speaking out on this population growth dogma. I remember a one-day Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) meeting on population when the two ACF councillors resolutely steered well clear of the topic all day. The ACF used to have a population policy but they discarded it.

"It is vital we understand the scale of impact that humans have on other animal species," says Tim Doherty, a wildlife ecologist at the University of Sydney. He is lead author of "[Human disturbance causes widespread disruption of animal movement](#)", an analysis of 208 separate studies on 167 animal species in all continents, ranging from the 0.05 gram sleepy orange butterfly to the more than 2000 kilogram great white shark.

The meta-analysis reveals that hunting and tourism in wilderness areas, especially during animal breeding periods, are especially problematic, leading to reduced animal fitness, lower chances of survival, reduced reproductive rates, genetic isolation and even local extinction.

Doherty says: "Reducing negative impacts of human activity will be vital for securing biodiversity in an increasingly human-dominated world."

Australia is the home not just for us but for the great number of unique species in highly biodiverse ecologies. We have destroyed much of this irreplaceable wealth, and now Australia tops the chart of sizeable nations' Ecological Footprints.

Population growth is still being pushed in many quarters. The Australian Financial Review's editorial of October 15 stated: "A Bigger Australia to push up growth, pay down debt".

Jenny Goldie, national president of Sustainable Population Australia, wrote in response:

"We are long past the time when we can focus only on any short-term economic benefits of massive population growth and ignore the social and environmental ramifications. Nor can we ignore the moral aspects of poaching skilled workers from other countries while we fail to adequately support our universities, TAFEs and other training institutions to provide the skills we need."

"What right has Australia to take the talents of other countries who have borne the cost of training them? Infrastructure costs have to be weighed against any economic gains we might achieve from a mass influx of people."

"Economists can no longer ignore the environmental consequences of population growth, not least the loss of other species' habitats including the koalas' from urban and agricultural expansion. And a critical issue is the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions in order to meet our climate change targets."

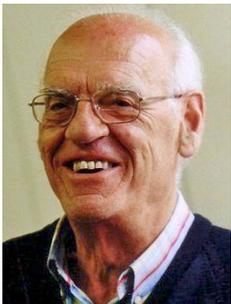
Eminent professor Paul Ehrlich tells us we are now witnesses to and principal actors in the Earth's sixth mass extinction. "Thousands of populations of critically endangered vertebrate animal species have been lost in a century, indicating that the sixth mass extinction is human caused and accelerating ... Our results re-emphasise the extreme urgency of taking massive global actions to save humanity's crucial life-support systems."

This article was first published on 1 November 2021 in Pearls and Irritations and is republished with permission. <https://johnmenadue.com/natures-right-a-world-with-limits-to-fossil-fuels-and-population/>

Oliver Howes was a writer-director at Film Australia and an independent producer, making documentaries and feature films. He has worked for the PNG government, in Japan and in Pacific states. He was a very early member of Australians for an Ecologically Sustainable Population that later became SPA.

Economic planners do not reckon with climate crisis bearing down on us

by David Shearman



The current population of 25 million may be Australia's limit, unless we are prepared to reduce our lifestyle footprint.

Population policy is vital to the future of Australia and the world in setting out the parameters by which environmental, social and economic sustainability can be achieved.

Unfortunately, population policy is the ultimate sleeping dog issue for if awakened a bite is certain. The Coalition and Labor only mention population in an economic context and in general the environmental movement finds it difficult to use it in advocacy.

Internationally, humanity's de facto position is for our species to proliferate beyond the limits of nature's resources and our social willingness to change, so eventually we will be contained by famine and other calamities.

Yet to retain our civilisation the linked climate and biodiversity emergencies must be addressed in tandem and both are closely related to the world's expanding population.

Each child born becomes a consumer, by using energy, currently fossil fuels, so creating more greenhouse emissions, and by degrading existing environments. When

extraction of resources and dumping of waste exceeds nature's capacity to repair, natural capital shrinks as do essential environmental services.

Professor Partha Dasgupta, an eminent economist from Cambridge University explains in his report "Economics of Biodiversity" commissioned by the British government that our application of economics is faulty because it does not include "depreciation of assets" such as the degradation of the biosphere.

Environmental assets must be included in national accounting and GDP.

Examples are detailed in the media every day. Currently Victorian forests are felled and their product used for building capital, but their role in absorbing carbon dioxide is lost and new trees will take decades to mature. Soil erosion will slowly compromise Melbourne's water supply which will necessitate expensive filtration systems. We know that even the creation of vehicular tracks through pristine forest compromises the ecology and its future.

So the Victorian government, faced with Melbourne's growing population and in a drying climate, is sacrificing a "forever crucial life support service" for a short-term capital gain. Victoria's adjusted GDP would perhaps be negative if this disaster is allowed to continue.

Opinion

This is a health, environment and sustainability issue which the Victorian government seems unable to understand in their most densely populated state in Australia and the most cleared of native vegetation. Victoria's record on biodiversity conservation is shocking for logging has continued for many years despite evidence from eminent scientists of severe damage.

The issue is now subject to alleged corrupt conduct perpetrated by the Office of the Conservation Regulator, and the forest regulation unit in the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning.

Population growth drives many such environmental degradations. But in the economic and political mind the need for jobs and a stable economy which provide electoral success override all else. We need more aged-care workers for an ageing population, but we purloin them from countries who need them more than us. The demand for more immigrants by the construction industry and the real-estate lobby nearly always trumps consideration of environmental sustainability.

However, governments imagine they have an even more compelling need to keep the savage dog soundly asleep. To the public the words "population policy" or "population control" carry the whiff of coercion and an attack on human rights, whereas contraception provides a decision of personal choice and is of vital importance to women in poor countries and indeed for their national development.

The federal government's budgetary position for the next 40 years, detailed in the Productivity Commission's Intergenerational Report, has a long section on fiscal sustainability but social development and environmental sustainability is absent. In the 198-page report our rapidly declining biodiversity receives 189 words; water security gets even less: 155 words.

The report has nine pages on climate change "in which the seriousness of the problem is acknowledged, along with the assurance that the government is dealing with it. However, the report's main concern relates not to the impact of population on sustainability but to the impact of an ageing population on economic growth and GDP.

The challenge for Australia is that the current population of 25 million may be our limit, unless we are prepared to reduce our lifestyle footprint. Indeed, there may already be too many people, taking into account a likely 2 degree or more increase in temperature, a scenario which increased significantly with COP26 failures to act on a 2030 target for emissions reduction by several fossil-fuel countries including Australia.

A further reason for inaction on population resides is failure of most politicians to grasp that impaired ecological systems, damaged by population growth and climate change, threaten human survival. These systems enable food, water and natural resource production, "life support systems" upon which we depend. As explained in a submission on ecosystem decline in Victoria by Doctors

for the Environment Australia, this is a crucial human health issue.

Admittedly the topic is wickedly complex but is further confounded by political polarisation, climate denial and the denigration of environmental groups opposed to development.



As politicians shy away from the debate, it is clear that a national population policy would help Victoria understand the crucial role of its forests. (Image: Forests Victoria) (Image: Unsplash)

How do we advance reform? An important task for the next federal parliament is to establish a sustainability commission of key scientists and social thinkers to present a relevant intergenerational process, including a population policy. The commission must have a key role in both education and action over the next rapidly changing 40 years.

Key questions will be; with likely temperatures in Australia rising to 2 degrees or more in coming decades, what does climate and water modelling tell us about the size of sustainable population and how much of this fragile continent will be habitable.

However, it is much too optimistic to believe such reform is currently within the ability of the Federal Parliament, so we might ask which state might gain most from such reform. Victoria is the obvious choice to lead with a commission.

Hopefully such a federal or state commission will inform parliamentarians and the public of the dismal fact that Australia's share of the world's natural resources is consumed by March 31 each year. This is accompanied by an illusion of prosperity and indefinite abundance. In fact, it is profligacy, fuelled by the consumption of our children and grandchildren's future.

Dr David Shearman AM PhD FRACP FRCPE, Emeritus Professor of Medicine, University of Adelaide, and co-founder of Doctors for the Environment Australia www.dea.org.au. This article first appeared in Pearls and Irritations on 18 December 2021 and is republished with permission.

Is it time to challenge the idea of Big Australia?

by Professor Jeffery Lewis & Dr Belinda Lewis

First published in *The Echo* on November 25, 2021

Premier Dominic Perrottet recently announced his intention to build a Big NSW. Much of this Big Population and Big Economy will be generated by a doubling of the state's pre-covid migration intake.

This is the Australian way. With one of the highest population growth rates in the OECD, Big Australia has faced little opposition. The argument is habitually hammered out – Australia needs high population growth to sustain high economic growth. The cornerstone of this growth policy is a migration program that delivers low-cost skilled and unskilled labour, capital inflow, greater military security, and the re-flush of new and younger consumers.

Impacts of growth

So how has this uncritical devotion to high rates of population growth arisen as a global, national and local phenomenon? The answer reaches into deep history.

Around 75,000 years ago a major planetary catastrophe reduced the population of homo sapiens to about 2,000 individuals. Surviving this near extinction event, humans gradually developed language and cultural systems that enabled them to migrate out of Africa and settle in new terrains through Asia, Australia and Europe.

By 12,000 Before Present (BP) the human population was around four million – a significant recovery for a species that lived by hunting and foraging in small, mostly nomadic bands. As exemplified by Australian Aborigines, these groups developed extremely sophisticated cultural, economic and technological systems which balanced sustainability with adaptive skills and knowledge.

At around 12,000 BP, however, a climate change crisis threatened human survival in particular areas of the planet; most notably along the Tigris-Euphrates River system. Along with other factors, this climate catastrophe forced these human groups to develop new survival strategies and technologies.

New economy

This new economy involved the domestication of wild animals and the cultivation of grains and other crops.

While most historians celebrate these cultural adaptations as 'progress to civilisation', the real story is more complex. We now know, for example, that the early agriculturalists had lower nutrition, poorer overall health and a shorter life expectancy than most hunter-gatherers.

Agriculture also created new vulnerabilities. Farming was labour intensive, requiring larger work forces, which in turn required more food and resources to survive. Moreover, economic resources (land, water, minerals) and stored value (grains, animals, manufactured goods) could be expropriated by larger groups with greater military power.

Along with susceptibility to new forms of disease, these vulnerabilities contributed to a cultural volition around the 'triple helix' of population growth, economic expansion and

militarism. This cultural volition continues into the present, and is also marked by the unceasing destruction of natural life systems involving the annihilation of other animal, plant and microorganism species.

By the rise of the Common Era (1 AD) these cultural changes had significantly increased the world's human population to around 300 million. The triple helix led to the development of ever-larger social systems like city-states, nations and empires, so that by 1830 the world population reached its first billion. By 1950 the figure was 2.5 billion. Within forty years that figure had doubled again; and currently it's around 7.8 billion.

Over the past century, the growth triad (population, economy, warfare) has accelerated to the point where it now threatens the life systems upon which it depends. Not only has the planet entered its sixth great Mass Extinction era, the biosphere is critically endangered by the escalating prospects of global warfare, pandemic disease and cataclysmic climate change.



The summit of Wollumbin/Mt Warning is a popular tourist destination. Photo australiangeographic.com.au

Consequences

Corporations, developers, militarists, economists and governments – who benefit most from Big Planet – deny the negative consequences of high population growth. This denial is grounded in several arguments:

1. Population growth and economic prosperity equate to 'progress', and progress is always good and inevitable;
2. Humans are more important than all other species;
3. Technology and adaptive consumer practices will solve all our problems;
4. Opponents of population growth are fundamentally racist because they oppose high rates of migration.

This last point is particularly pertinent in Australia where 'green politics' often conflate population growth with the ethics of diversity and refugee advocacy. While these ethics are laudable in themselves, they have subsumed the rights and needs of all other species who have no voice in parliament and little protection from human violence. Sadly, not all the world's problems can be solved by choosing Fair Trade Coffee.

Opinion

Ideal Australia

Despite this censorial context, a few ecologists have spoken out against the growth agenda of Big Australia. A research team based at the University of South Australia recently concluded that Australia's ideal population size is around 15 million.

For these researchers and others, the negative consequences of high population growth clearly outweigh the benefits. These negative consequences include: environmental degradation, climate change, food insecurity, habitat destruction, species extinction, depletion of artesian and surface waterways, destruction of forests and other natural environments, urban congestion, collapse of social infrastructure, accelerating housing and land costs, intensified social competition, conflict and alienation, suppression of working conditions and wages, overcrowding of recreational spaces.

Sacrifices to the dollar

All of these issues are pertinent to the Byron Shire. As residents know so well, the region has become severely damaged by private developments associated with mass tourism. As agents of the triple helix, state and federal governments are knowingly sacrificing biodiverse regions, like Byron, to the volition of economy and population growth.

The Byron community and environment are fodder for the esurience of corporate and government power. As urban populations continue to grow, Byron and other regions become tradable commodities in the pleasure of financial return.

So, we need a politics that places humans, other species and the environment on an equal footing. Big Australia needs to be replaced by a Smaller Australia that uses its affluence to care for people who are already the victims of the triple helix disease. Rather than absorb the disease into our own lives and social systems, we need to help others in their recovery. Equally, we are duty-bound to reverse the destructive impact of this Population Pandemic on other life forms and the biosphere that sustains us all.



Jeff and Belinda Lewis

Dr Belinda Lewis is a health anthropologist from Monash University. Professor Jeffrey Lewis is an anthropology professor. He is a former Research Dean at RMIT and Professorial Fellow at the London School of Economics. His books include *Language Wars and Media and Human Violence: From Savage Lovers to Violent Complexity*. He recently completed a government-commissioned research report on Right Wing Extremism in Australia.

Obituary

Farewell to three great men

In just one week around new year, the world lost three great conservationists: E O Wilson, Thomas Lovejoy and Richard Leakey. All three had warned of the dangers of overpopulation.



Edward O Wilson, photo The Guardian

In his 1992 book, *The Diversity of Life*, the world's leading authority on ants, Edward O Wilson wrote: "The raging monster upon the land is population growth. In its presence, sustainability is but a fragile theoretical construct." Twenty-five years later, writing for the Sierra Club

Magazine, he said: "The biosphere does not belong to us; we belong to it. The organisms that surround us in such beautiful profusion are the product of 3.8 billion years of evolution by natural selection. We are one of its present-day products, having arrived as a fortunate species of old-world primate. And it happened only a geological eye-blink ago."

Wilson wrote the book *Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life* in 2016 in which he proposed that half of the Earth's surface should be designated a human-free natural reserve to preserve biodiversity.

Thomas Lovejoy was a tropical and conservation biologist who had worked in the Amazon since 1965. He was the World Bank's chief biodiversity adviser. Ten years ago, writing in *The Guardian*, he said: "Over-exploitation and habitat loss as a result of population pressures is accelerating the extinction of

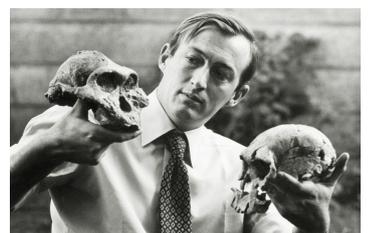


Thomas Lovejoy, photo Wilson Centre

plant and animal species, undermining the poor in parts of the world where people are heavily dependent on nature for livelihoods. Areas of rapid population growth overlay those with high numbers of threatened and vulnerable plant species, and much of the coming growth is expected to take place in the tropics, where ecosystems harbour the planet's richest forms of biodiversity."

Making the connection between climate change and population, Lovejoy went on: "It's unpopular to apply sustainability to the concept of population growth, as the word "population" evokes worries about state control and limits on reproductive freedom. But slower population growth can not only lessen vulnerability to climate change impacts, it also has the potential to significantly reduce future greenhouse gas emissions."

In a 1995 book, palaeontologist and conservationist Richard Leakey predicted a sixth extinction, echoed by his daughter Louise Leakey in 2017: "We are undoubtedly the cause of the sixth mass extinction event that the planet has seen in its history." And Richard himself warned: "I do not think we in any way should feel complacent that we are not on the list of possible extinctions." JG



Richard Leakey, photo CNN

In early January, Pope Francis suggested that couples who prefer pets to children were selfish. He said substituting pets for children “takes away our humanity”.

Not-So-Divine Intervention: Pope’s Recent Comments Undermine Procreative and Intergenerational Justice

by Nandita Bajaj



Nandita Bajaj

Pope Francis’ recent comments calling those who are choosing to forego procreation to be selfish fly in the face of our fight for social, reproductive, and ecological justice. Over the course of his papacy, he has demonstrated some refreshingly liberal views favouring social equity, ecological justice, and planetary stewardship over an unexamined adherence to traditional norms. That is why his statements are deeply concerning because they grossly minimise the very values that he is calling his followers to espouse.

After fighting for personal and reproductive liberation for centuries, many women around the world are increasingly able to break free from their prescribed biological and gender roles and authentically exercise their right to have no or fewer children. This is an achievement that must be celebrated. Pope Francis’ claim that “a denial of fatherhood and motherhood diminishes us” operates from a pronatalist worldview that reduces people’s identities to their reproductive choices. Pronatalism is a set of social, cultural, patriarchal, religious, political, and economic pressures placed on people to have children. These pervasive and often oppressive pressures inhibit liberated and responsible procreative decisions. There are harmful consequences to such rhetoric. Approximately 270 million women worldwide still experience major barriers to family planning education and contraceptive uptake. These barriers are often rooted in fear and misinformation about contraception as a result of pronatalist falsehoods. We must move beyond dichotomous narratives that pit one choice against another. Autonomous, authentic, and responsible choices, be it parenthood — biological or adoptive — or non-parenthood are equally valid, and a hallmark of a liberated society.

In addition, given that our planet is in grave peril, foregoing parenthood at the moment is an especially non-selfish choice both for the sake of the potential child who will likely inherit extremely unfavourable life circumstances, and for the sake of the planet. Pope Francis’ statement that “having a child is always a risk, but there is more risk in not having a child,” is ill-informed. Mountains of evidence show that due to the climate catastrophe, children born today and in the future will live “an unprecedented life”, facing “conditions which older generations have never experienced. According to the most recent report from UNICEF, almost half the world’s 2.2 billion children are already at “extremely high risk”

from the impacts of the climate crisis and pollution. Furthermore, having one fewer child in industrialised countries like Canada is over 20 times more effective than other high-impact personal actions that one can take to reduce their carbon footprint, such as going car-free, flying less, or becoming vegan. Our global ecological footprint is at least 75% larger than the planet can support sustainably. Those of us living in high-income countries like the US and Canada are consuming several times our equitable share of the global biocapacity, compared to people in low-income countries. That is why our procreative choices have an enormous impact on the planet and marginalised communities.

Pope Francis rightly challenged our predatory attitude towards the planet, yet he claims that having a relationship with animals instead of our potential children is “a loss of humanity”. The test of our humanity should lie not in our decisions to have children or not, but rather how we treat each other, nature, and non-human animals. Human population has doubled from four billion to about eight billion in the last 50 years, and we are growing at an alarming rate of 80 million people each year, which is about one million people every four days. The growth in our human enterprise, driven in large part by harmful pronatalism, has come at the cost of the rest of the planet. We represent just 0.01% of all living things, yet since the dawn of our civilisation, we have caused the loss of 83% of all wild mammals and half of plants. Humans and the domesticated animals that we kill for food now comprise about 96% of all mammal biomass on Earth, while all other mammals represent just about 4%.

Pope Francis has demonstrated a deep capacity for care for social and ecological justice. Given the immense influence he has over people, however, his recent comments show a disregard for our current reality. They undid the great strides we have made in the arena of social, reproductive, and ecological justice and nullified his own calls to empower youth to be the “critical conscience of society”. Pope Francis has a responsibility to retract these damaging pronatalist statements. He must promote just and sustainable family planning practices by advocating for liberated, informed and responsible procreative decisions, so that our human footprint can be in balance with life on Earth, enabling all species to thrive.

Nandita Bajaj is the Executive Director of Population Balance.

The Depopulation Imperative

by Paul Collins

Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2021 176pp. \$16.95.
RRP ISBN 9781922669216

Reviewed by Nick Goldie

Population is an issue that many people don't want to talk about, or even think about. It's too hard. Can-do capitalists want a bigger population because they believe it means more customers. The Left is also inclined to see more people as customers, but as social beings. Religions love the idea of bigger congregations.

Historian Paul Collins is rather more thoughtful. Once a Jesuit, he is still a Catholic, now married, and able to pursue his own important themes, especially the inadequacy of the Church in dealing with population or the environment. He has written history: *Hell's Gates* (2002), the terrible story of the Tasmanian cannibal Alexander Pearce; *God's Earth: Religion as if matter really mattered* (1995); *Burn, the epic story of bushfires in Australia* (2006); theological-based environmental enquiries (*Judgment Day*, 2009) - in which he noted that, according to the Bible, the day will come "for destroying those who destroy the earth"; and most recently *The Depopulation Imperative*.

The book starts with a bang. Pandemics happen, says Collins, and COVID-19 is exactly what we expected. It's just a matter of time before something even worse looms over the horizon, and the denser the population the more devastating the effect. Take Niger, he says. Just one more African country, the size of France, getting some sort of return from the sale of uranium. By the year 2050 the population will be sixty million, the median age just fifteen (and pregnant), with the annual income just US\$240 per person. About 11% will be able to read and write.

Collins gives Niger as an example because he has access to the figures, but he also mentions Mali, Angola and other countries where population growth is spiralling upwards. He points out that humanity has a long history of fouling its own nest and driving other species to extinction: the thylacine in Tasmania, the passenger pigeon in North America to name but two, and this is an ongoing process.

Collins is particularly critical of Australian immigration policies. He points out that while 63% of Australia's rapid population growth rate is due to immigration, "natural increase" (that is, the excess of births over deaths) contributed only 37% to the country's population increase.

This has direct consequences in areas such as environmental destruction and Australia's contribution to global climate change, as large numbers of people move from a pattern of modest consumption to Australia's free-wheeling attitudes. This also raises the question of sustainability: the "carrying capacity" of our planet. How many people can planet Earth support, while "maintaining a reasonable standard of living, at the same time protecting biodiversity and dealing with global warming?"

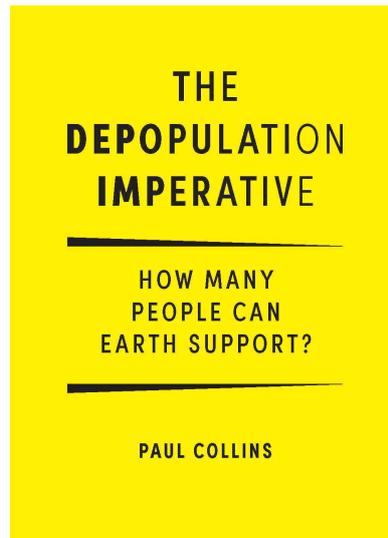
There are a number of formulae used by researchers, which attempt to relate numbers of people together with rates of consumption. Using the model proposed by the UK-based Population Matters, says Collins, "most countries are living far beyond their carrying capacity." He quotes the UK's mid-2021 population of 68.2 million against a "light footprint carrying capacity" of 23 million, the USA 333 million against 254 million, and Australia with 25.7 million and a carrying capacity of 18 million. Some of the poorer nations show a horrifying gap, says Collins. China 1.44 billion against 168 million; India 1.39

billion against 103 million; while among the poorest Bangladesh has 166.4 million against a capacity for six million; and Pakistan 225.4 million against a capacity for 26 million.

In the short term, says Collins, there is no way in which we are able to halt or even slow down the present unsustainable rate of population growth, short of catastrophic pandemic, warfare or natural disaster. There is indeed a horrifying list of real and imminent possibilities ranging from societal collapse to species extinction.

Collins is a long-time Patron of Sustainable Population Australia, as was Canberra biologist Frank Fenner, who wondered whether the eradication of smallpox had really been of benefit to humanity. In the last year of his life, Fenner told Collins that he was deeply concerned about the future. "Homo sapiens will become extinct," said Fenner, "perhaps within a hundred years. A lot of other animals will too. Mitigation of human numbers would slow things down a bit, but there are too many people here already."

"Despite the fact that it will infuriate some people," writes Paul Collins, "an uncompromising emphasis on the priority of earth first must become our core moral principle ... the maintenance of the integrity of the earth must come before everything else. And by 'everything' I mean everything, including us."



Branch News

QLD

Queensland Branch held its AGM in November and was delighted to have Senator Amanda Stoker attend thanks to the excellent outreach and networking skills of our Treasurer Tony Matta. The branch presented its case for rethinking Big Australia followed by a Question-and-Answer time with the Senator.



Qld meeting with Senator Amanda Stoker

While we were disappointed the Senator repeated the standard Big Australia talking points, we were impressed by her willingness to engage a somewhat hostile audience - the Q&A at times resembled some sort of combination of peer review, vivas and boxing. We were encouraged by the fact that some of her answers and positions seemed conceptually soluble with more time and engagement, on which the branch executive is still working.

The AGM was also a great opportunity for members across the great and vast state of Queensland to get together in person. Dr Ridd won the award for farthest travelled on the night coming all the way from the Atherton tableland which is closer to Port Moresby than Brisbane.

Queensland branch executive held its first meeting in January and is busily planning the year ahead.

Edward Smith

ACT

The last quarter of 2021 again was quiet as far as Branch activities were concerned. All of our Committee meetings were held via Zoom.

We did manage to hold a seminar for members and guests. Our guest speaker was Rod Taylor who gave a very interesting presentation based on his recent book publication, 'Ten Journeys on a Fragile Planet'.

Both during and after his talk, there were many interesting comments and questions of Rod, who also produced a well-received video that has been downloaded on to YouTube. I understand that the video has attracted considerable attention.

Since we last met, Dr Chris McMurray has announced her resignation from the Committee and from SPA. Her contribution to the Committee will be greatly missed. In particular, I would like to acknowledge the extensive survey she conducted on behalf of SPA to gauge members views on a wide range of matters.

As long as the pandemic continues to greatly impact on our ability to conduct meetings and public events, our activities will be heavily curtailed but hopefully we can look forward to better times ahead.

Colin Lyons

VIC/TAS

The SPAVictas committee met on 4 December 2021 by Zoom. We have been unable to meet in person for many months due to the pandemic. The next committee meeting will be held on 6 March however possible. We warmly welcome new committee member, Ian Butterworth.

2022 AGM and election of office bearers will be held on Saturday 2 April; the time and venue are yet to be decided. Hoping to have an actual meeting as opposed to a "virtual" one!!

Late last year our Vice President, Daniel Webby made a submission to Melbourne's Future Planning Framework, and also released late last year was the Victorian Parliamentary report on the Inquiry into Ecosystem Decline in Victoria. The Inquiry attracted almost one thousand submissions, and our committee made a detailed submission to the Inquiry. You can find this at <https://www.parliament.vic.gov.au/epc-lc/article/4455>

Jill Quirk

WA

Afraid to say it appears that most here like me, except for Robert Boni who has kept up a continual supply of news articles, have been doing very little except trying to aestivate. Hence there is nothing much to report other than our planned participation at two forthcoming events. One is the O-day at UWA later in February while the other is the Wetlands Conference at the end of the first week in February. This was apparently being 'divided' into four sections and I thought the Sustainability portion was a good section within which we could display ourselves. Last week we were notified there wasn't any room for us!!!! Hmmm.

Judith Odgaard

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Saturday 19 March 2022 at 11am.
(Morning tea will be served at 10.30am.)

**Pavilion Room, Australian Centre for Christianity and Culture, Charles Sturt University,
15 Blackall St, Barton, ACT 2600.**

All financial members of SPA are welcome to attend.

There will be no invited speaker as SPA will be hosting the Fenner Conference (Making Australian agriculture sustainable) at the Shine Dome at ANU over the previous two days. Should there be a Covid-induced lockdown, the AGM will be held by Zoom.

There will be no constitutional amendments nor elections for office as the number of nominations did not exceed the various positions to be filled. Nevertheless, if you wish to have someone vote on your behalf at the meeting, please find a proxy form on the website. population.org.au/agm2022



Presenter Rod Taylor, Robyn Coghlan and president Colin Lyons at ACT meeting

NSW

NSW's Committee meeting in January had a focus on strategic planning for 2022. The outcomes were:

PR: Our Video Competition for school children, initially planned for late 2020, will be refined slightly to change the focus to Sustainability, with the hope of gaining more support. This will not be re-launched until COVID-19 landscape becomes more predictable and suitable for such a project.

A sub-committee will form a letter writing "Tiger Team" to write independent letters to the editor with a goal of achieving a 6-to-8-hour turn-around following a newsworthy article, which requires support or rebuttal.

SPA T-Shirts, with updated messaging and QR code will be explored with the view of getting our message out and boosting membership.

Membership: Lesley Scott will take on the role of Membership officer to follow up lapsed membership to keep our membership strong. Induction of new members will be explored to welcome them into SPA, to engage with them so they feel valued and supported. We also plan to start bi-monthly Zoom catch-up meetings with all NSW members.

Authors of "Letters to the Editors" to newspapers supportive of lower population levels will be approached for membership.

"Their Future is in Your Hands – a Strategic Plan for Humanity." This is a personal project developed by me, as it was considered to be more effective as an independent document, but with endorsement from multiple NFP organisations. Seventeen independent plans are included which are integrated to offer holistic solutions incorporating: a Steady State Economy; an Ecologically Sustainable Population; a Carbon Fee and Dividend; and changes to legislation to secure long term policies independent of short-term political interference. The document was reviewed by CASSE-NSW but was too large at 120,000 words and is being split into two parts, before being released for a second review.

Graham Wood

SA/NT

On 21 December, Peter Martin and Sandra Kanck had a half-hour meeting about infrastructure and its relationship to population with a staffer from the office of Dan Cregan, the Independent state MP and Speaker of the House of Assembly. His electorate of Kavel in the Adelaide Hills has had remarkably fast growth in recent years, and he has been vocal about infrastructure failing to keep up. We later received the following feedback - 'The Speaker has reviewed the materials and thanks you for providing him with this detailed information.' We hope he'll make use of the info at some stage, and make the link between endlessly seeking to grow a population and the infrastructure deficit that can rapidly develop. Of course, it's just one aspect of sustainability.

On 31 January, John Coulter and Sandra will meet on-line with Rebekha Sharkie, MHR for Mayo to discuss the same issue.

In the meantime, the local SPA group has had an interesting exchange about the idea of a planned annual reduction (10%) in fossil fuel use, as suggested by a lecture by the NZ academic engineer, Dr Susan Krumdieck, and sent around by local SPA member John Tons. It's available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eSPVBblztWk>. That arose from local member Michael Dwyer recommending her book 'Transition Engineering'. John Tons said it was an idea with close parallels to his own writing, and John Coulter pointed out that the American Al Bartlett had argued along similar lines some years ago. However, in John Coulter's view, such a gradual winding back may no longer be possible. In John C's words,

'The real problem does not lie here in a transition based on technology or engineering. It lies in the recognition that any further growth in either population or the economy as presently measured is unsustainable. We have to embrace a much smaller human world. We will embrace a much smaller human world because that is our inevitable future.'

We certainly have an excellent basis in this discussion for a members and friends meeting in Adelaide early in 2022, which hopefully Covid will allow.

Peter Martin

Is there a journalist in the house?

Current newsletter editor, Jenny Goldie, is finding herself a bit stretched and would like to hand over to someone else after the May issue. No remuneration, just a bit of work for a week each quarter. Quite a lot of satisfaction though to compensate! Contact Jenny on editor@population.org.au to discuss. Journalism experience not critical but helpful.

Tonga emergency appeal

The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) is appealing for help. On 15 January, an underwater volcanic blast located about 65 kilometres north of Tonga's capital, Nuku'alofa, triggered a tsunami of up to 15 metres high, and sent wave surges across the Pacific. Extensive damage has been reported, including to health centres. IPPF has finally made contact with the Tonga Family Health Association (TFHA) who reports the ash cover is significant and pervasive. As with all disasters, the sexual and reproductive health (SRH) needs of women and girls are estimated to be high. TFHA is planning to distribute clean delivery kits as 200 women are expected to give birth in the next month. It also hopes to provide other essential services including pregnancy and delivery support as well as contraception. If you can help financially, go to [Emergency Appeal: Tonga | IPPF](#).



Report

Communication Manager's Report

Michael Bayliss

The end of 2021 was another busy time for myself and the Marketing and Membership Committee.

We launched three promotional campaigns from October 21 to December 21. SPA's first 'My Bulging City' video, produced by ACT SPA member Rod Taylor and detailing overpopulation issues in Canberra, resulted in 7600 views on YouTube, many thousands more on social media, and helped SPA reach 200 subscribers for Christmas. A second video for SPA's 'Let's Re-think Big Australia' campaign, examining the impacts of migration on wage stagnation, reached 21 600 Facebook and Twitter users in December.

Finally, we trailed a sponsorship deal with the YourLifeChoices journal, including three online banner ads, a sponsored article and two news items. In total, this resulted in 314,000 impressions and hundreds of referrals to the SPA web site.

Though none of this campaigning caught the attention of the mainstream media, we caught the eye of international podcasts and media. I have been recently interviewed on 'The Overpopulation Podcast', 'The Steady Stater' (hosted by Brian Czech from CASSE) and 'This Sustainable Life' (hosted by TedX speaker and award-winning author New York author Joshua Spodek). I also had an article published in the US based 'Ending Overshoot' blog.

I believe the lack of mainstream media attention belies the impact that SPA has made in the broader community through our active campaigning, considering our small size. Our constantly improving performance on social media, website views, and the success of our end of calendar year donation appeal is testament to this.

Looking ahead this year, I will be assisting the Membership and Marketing Committee in promoting the Climate Change Discussion Paper, co-authored by our Patron Ian Lowe. In anticipation of the Federal election in May, the MMC will be prioritising campaigns that encourage political debate on national population policy. Post-Growth Australia Podcast has launched a third season this year and will include interviews with Brian Czech (CASSE) and Paul Collins (SPA Patron).

I would like to give a special thanks to all SPA members who donated to our end of calendar year appeal and those who gave their time to respond to the membership survey.



About SPA

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.

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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.