

# Growth in numbers 'not sustainable'

A stabilised population is paramount, says advocacy group.

By Megan Breen

When the world population clock ticked over to 8 billion people on November 15, 2022, it marked a milestone for humanity. It not only symbolised human progress but also drew attention to the profound environmental impact associated with population growth.

Even before we reached 8 billion people it was clear that the planet was suffering. As the world population continues to grow, it is only exerting increasing pressure on our resources and ecosystems.

As UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres commented at the time, "... it is a reminder of our shared responsibility to care for our planet and a moment to reflect on where we still fall short of our commitments to one another".

As the world soars past that 8 billion landmark, in Australia, the population is projected to reach almost 39 million by 2060.

That's an extra 12 million people added in less than 40 years. In real terms, that's another Sydney, plus another Melbourne, plus another Perth.

Most of the growth will come from immigration and the children migrants will have. Many argue it is not an ecologically sustainable figure.

"The problem is," says Jenny Goldie, president of environmental advocacy group Sustainable Population Australia, "our natural ecosystems are deteriorating and cannot support such growth. Australia's population size has already exceeded what can be reliably supported by rain-fed water supplies, which are under increasing threat from climate change. We are accelerating growth at a scale we can't sustain."

Sustainable Population Australia argues population growth is a key driver of negative environmental impacts, especially the loss of habitat, biodiversity and agricultural land.

With the backing of prominent patrons such as Professor Ian Lowe, Professor Tim Flannery, Dr Katharine Betts and Dr Paul Collins, it is calling for lower annual net migration, returning to the 20th century average of between 60,000 and 80,000 more people a year, compared to the figures



**Sustainable Population Australia president Jenny Goldie.**



of well over 200,000 a year that have occurred this century.

"As an affluent country where each person's environmental impact is large, Australia should not be increasing its population, we should be stabilising it," Goldie says. "That doesn't mean stopping immigration – it means getting immigration down to a lower level so that it only feeds a stable population."

In addition to putting further pressure on housing availability and congested infrastructure, the environmental impacts of continued population growth for Australia should be a cause for concern for all of those who live here, she adds.

"The evidence is there – the *Australia State of the Environment 2021* report found that human activity and population growth are major drivers of many pressures on biodiversity, including through urban expansion, tourism, industrial expansion, pollution,

fishing, hunting and development of infrastructure."

Crucially, the Commonwealth report adds that: "The impacts from population growth are extensive and increasing in many areas."

How that pressure manifests is often lost in the discussion, Goldie says, despite the very obvious impact it has on wildlife.

"As we continue to grow our population, people need somewhere to live and that is driving the expansion in urban fringes," she says.

"However, what is often not discussed is that in the process fragile ecosystems are destroyed and the habitats of native species are lost forever. For example, urban expansion has meant koalas are nearly extinct in south-east Queensland and have declined in the Sydney Basin bioregion by an estimated 22 per cent in the last 20 years."

Other impacts are endangered wildflowers being wiped out, bee-supporting green corridors being removed and prime agricultural land being developed for housing, reducing the ability to feed a growing population.

Then there is the impact on human development itself, Goldie says.

"Research shows that urban environments with healthy vegetation, [lower] population density and [fewer] roads are associated with better health behaviours in children."

The other obvious impact is the increase in emissions that comes from more people.

"There is clear evidence that population growth also adds to our greenhouse gas emissions and climate risks," Goldie says. "Between 1990 and 2019, Australia's total greenhouse gas emissions from energy rose by 49 per cent due to population growth of 8.3 million people."

"We consume at a much higher rate in affluent countries, so if we increase our population, every additional person will start consuming more. There is also evidence that the average migrant to Australia increases their carbon footprint fourfold by adopting Australian lifestyles."

Ultimately, we need to accept that population growth accelerates all environmental impacts, she argues.

"Much time is wasted debating whether it is population growth or inequitable and excessive consumption that is driving environmental deterioration. Of course, it is both together; population is the multiplier of consumption behaviours – and we should be addressing both."

## When it comes to our future, bigger isn't always better

Population growth is detrimental to Australia's environment.

Australia, we need to talk.



[www.population.au](http://www.population.au)



Authorised by Sustainable Population Australia Incorporated, Canberra

