



China introduced a 'one-child' rule in 1979, and estimates this family planning policy has prevented 400 million births in the 30 years since then

## The elephant in the room?

*Sir David Attenborough has been making headlines and stirring up trouble. What is he talking about? Simon Hodgson takes a deep breath and follows him into the murky water*

What links 12 October 1999, an 18th century clergyman-scholar and Sir David Attenborough, broadcaster and national treasure? Need a clue? Here's one in the words of the aforementioned clergyman-scholar: "The power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man," wrote Thomas Malthus. "Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio. Subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio. A slight acquaintance with numbers will show the immensity of the first power in comparison with the second."

Global population. Some environmentalists see it as the 'elephant in the room' – enormous, dominant and yet unmentionable. And so Sir David, in his careful and thoughtful way, has accepted a role as Patron of the Optimum Population Trust (OPT), catapulting the issue into the headlines and opening what he must feel to be a long overdue debate. "I've never seen a [environmental] problem that wouldn't be

easier to solve with fewer people, or harder, and ultimately impossible, with more," he says.

Indeed there's a congestion of statistics that seem to support him, piling up in an echo of the growth they describe so vividly. The UN calculates that we crashed through five billion people on 11 July 1987, shot past six billion on 12 October 1999 and will hit seven billion as we prepare for the London Olympics in February 2012. Already in my lifetime the world's population has doubled.

And, paralleling Malthus' clinical mathematics, the WWF calculates annually the day when we go into Ecological Debt; the day when humanity's demand exceeds global bio-capacity, the ability of the planet to create resources and absorb waste. In 2007 we passed this milestone on 6 October, and it's getting earlier each year. We are, according to the WWF, already living 20 per cent beyond our means and still the population climbs relentlessly.

So why isn't the issue front and centre of every piece of environmental policy?

Why would anyone disagree with such a compelling case? Because although the diagnosis may be clear (and some would argue it's not – more anon) the prescription is difficult. Many would agree that the global population needs to be controlled; it's a lovely big generalised number isn't it? Who'd miss a billion fewer? But there's the rub. The global population is of course built up piece by piece from almost 200 national populations, which are in turn the sum of thousands of regional and urban populations. Where should the axe fall? Who's got too many? Is it those countries where each of us hogs a disproportionate share of precious bio-capacity? But most of our populations are static or shrinking (allowing for the effects of migration). So should we tackle the countries driving the growth in numbers? But each of their people is typically consuming only a fraction of those in the developed nations. And who is 'we' anyway?

You can see we're already wading deep in perilous and murky waters. We're

only a step away from controversial and alarming topics like reproductive rights, contraception and migration control. And we don't often like the sort of people who argue them; we can almost see our unsavoury bedfellows pulling back the covers and climbing in.

Some continue undeterred. The topic is too important and too pressing to be sidelined by these difficulties. Jonathon Porritt is a brave exponent, living with the controversy to get his point across. He was – it's worth noting – a Patron of the OPT long before Sir David. For him, the fertile (if you'll pardon the pun) territory is reproductive rights, particularly the encouraging falls in birth rates that follow concerted investment in family planning, reproductive health and higher educational standards for women. The argument runs that given the choice, women won't have as many children so we can tackle the problem without infringing anyone's rights. Porritt points out that the total fertility rate in Kenya declined from eight children per woman in 1979 to 4.7 by 1998 following aid investment in family planning. But he goes on to show that a collapse in this funding has inevitably been followed by a rise in fertility rates. Kenya's population would have peaked at 44 million but is now set to hit 80 million by 2050.

Others take a different view of the argument. They point out that population per se tells us nothing; it's consumption and production rates which matter. If we consume less per head and think up more efficient ways to produce we can support everyone and welcome more. In fact there is even some evidence that denser populations

can drive production with reduced environmental damage. And the statistics suggest they have a point: with every one of 300 million Americans emitting 20 tonnes of carbon dioxide per year it does seem a bit rich to focus on keeping Kenya's population (0.3 tonnes per person) under 50 million. They point out that Malthus predicted

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population outstripping production by the middle of the 19th Century. And Ehrlich's crunch came (or didn't) in the 1980s. Neither took account of changes to technology and farming practices which boosted production and kept us all fed. This view holds that we'll do the same again with eco-efficiency.

And the answer? We've had thesis and antithesis – now, surely, for the synthesis. Well I'm afraid it's beyond me and – I venture to suggest – the scope of this magazine. Instead we might do well to look again at Malthus in his assertion that “the power of population is so superior to the power of the earth to produce subsistence

for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race. The vices of mankind are active and able ministers of depopulation. They are the precursors in the great army of destruction, and often finish the dreadful work themselves. But should they fail in this war of extermination, sickly seasons, epidemics, pestilence, and plague advance in terrific array, and sweep off their thousands and tens of thousands. Should success be still incomplete, gigantic inevitable famine stalks in the rear, and with one mighty blow levels the population with the food of the world”. One way or another, he argues, the problem will solve itself. The choices we face aren't about the end – they are about the means.

So the task is to navigate this messy terrain and find the path of least suffering. At the deepest level, therefore our motivation is compassion. We can wait for Malthus' 'terrific array' or find another route more congruent with our values. And yet we can easily turn to cold-hearted prescriptions that de-humanise and objectify. 'Avoided births', 'net fertility rates' and 'consumption per capita' all obscure the fact that every single statistic is a real human being struggling to make his or her way in the world. Every single birth represents a life begun and another transformed. If our motivation is compassion, we would do well to keep it front of mind, whichever side of the argument we find ourselves on. ■

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