Solutions to Overshoot: We Don't Have to Choose Just One

By Dave Gardner
Executive Director

In place of the usual, well-researched article by our research associate, Alan Ware, we elected in this issue to include a guest essay by Mike Hanauer. Mike is a longtime sustainable population advocate, having served on the board of directors of Zero Population Growth (ZPG) years ago, when world population was about half what it is today.

Here Mike makes the case that we won’t achieve sustainability if we ignore the population multiplier in the equation and focus all efforts on adjusting lifestyles to shrink our ecological footprints. He writes that we’re entitled to a certain level of comfort, and we simply won’t scale back our footprints dramatically. And even if we did, population growth would soon undo the gains.

I’m sure (and Mike agrees) we’re so deep into overshoot that we must work on both reducing our population AND shrinking our footprints. But so far all evidence suggests the former is the most feasible. We’ve not demonstrated much willingness to “skinny up” our lifestyles, and pursuit of the Holy Grail of everlasting economic growth (which expands our footprints) shows few signs of abating.

Meanwhile, we’ve shown that we ARE willing to choose smaller families. Global average fertility has fallen from 5 to 2.4 in the past 60 years. Several nations have achieved dramatic reductions in birth rates over a much shorter time simply by adopting that as a goal, educating people, rallying public support, and making contraception easy to obtain.

I don’t think that means we should ignore the lifestyle changes we need to make, or the need to get policymakers unhooked from their addiction to economic growth. But I do think the evidence supports stepping up efforts to rally public participation in lowering birth rates — even in the extended family.

Sustainable Population: A Necessary Element in Achieving the Sustainable “Good Life” in the U.S. and Beyond

By Michael Hanauer
We Have So Many Choices

In science, there is a rule of thumb called the 20-80 rule which says that 20 percent of the underlying problems often cause 80 percent of the significant effects. To be successful in the longer term, we must choose carefully.

Because the United States severely aggravates so many of the world’s environmental problems, because of our responsibility to set an example for the world, and because this is my home, I believe we should place a significant emphasis on our domestic impacts.

“Think Globally, Act Locally, Set the Example” may be the only strategy that can work in today’s world.

Reducing both our overconsumption and our overpopulation are vital to our ride toward sustainability. Where should we place our emphasis?

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Listen to the Latest Overpopulation Podcasts - Recent Episodes

In the latest episodes of The Overpopulation Podcast, Dave Gardner continues in-depth conversations with leading thinkers and WPB staff about solving overpopulation. The podcast fills a unique role in the podcast universe as it focuses directly on the overpopulation issue and how to solve it. That uniqueness has helped build an international audience and greatly expand WPB’s international reach — almost half of all listeners live outside the United States.

Find all the episodes at worldpopulationbalance.org

Episode 28
Kids: To Have or Not To Have?
Is motherhood an essential part of womanhood? Maxine Trump gave this decision careful and thorough consideration. She documents this in her new film, To Kid or Not to Kid. The filmmaker shares her thoughts and observations on the subject with the World Population Balance team.

Episode 27
Family Size Decisions that Consider Welfare of Children
Today, more and more young women and couples are questioning whether having children is the right thing to do in a world destined for the ravages of an unstable climate. They are concerned for the welfare of any children who ARE brought into this world. Dave Gardner talks with guests Sarah Bexell and Catharina Graff-Hughey about their child and community-centered approach to planning small families.

Episode 26
Playing Whack-A-Mole with Pro-Growth Bias
Dropping birth rates are good news, not a “slump” we should hope is temporary. Yet news reports, headlines and commentaries about this are consistently displaying a pro-growth bias. In this episode The Overpopulation Podcast team plays whack-a-mole with instances of overpopulation disininformation.

Episode 25
Too Nervous to Discuss Overpopulation?
The most recent in what’s becoming a never-ending barrage of alarming scientific reports suggests a million animal species are facing potential extinction.
Isn’t Technology Our Ace in the Hole?

Frequently, we believe that technology can solve any problem. The truth is that the greatest cause of new problems is techno-fix solutions to old problems. Even our present population growth was brought on by technology which prevented or cured disease and allowed large gains in food productivity (often by increased use of fertilizers and pesticides, and cruel treatment of farm animals). But, the most important fact here is that technology rarely produces lasting solutions, only additional difficult choices and tradeoffs.

An example is the solar or electric automobile. The batteries are polluting in production and disposal. The solar panels are polluting to produce, the power generated to charge the vehicle usually requires power plants - and we still keep gaining more cars.

Technology usually provides many options, each of which has different side effects. Making a choice often requires selecting the lesser of a number of evils. Today, because of higher population levels, the NIMBY (Not-In-My-Back-Yard) syndrome makes it nearly impossible to rationally choose - often none are really acceptable. Almost every choice involves leaving something behind in somebody’s or some critter’s backyard.

Population Size Matters Most to the Big Picture and Over the Longer Term

Even where new technology or reduced consumption might help, consider the following:

1. Population growth directly drives increasing overall consumption, but not vice versa. The existence of a person necessarily consumes resources, takes up space, and disposes of waste products. By accepting that “reasonable” levels of consumption are OK, we must bring population into the formula since each additional person has a much more significant impact on the ecosystem. When considering Earth’s most intractable problems, overpopulation actually occurs at a lower point with a higher standard of living.

2. Population growth creates problems beyond the impacts of excess consumption. Will just decreasing consumption have an appreciable impact on reducing the crowds at our national parks or our loss of open space? Can it alone halt the loss of direct political representation, the inability to find solitude or the reduction of stress or crime? How about our traffic or the lines at the mall? Can just reducing consumption stop urban sprawl, or keep our communities from raising taxes to continually provide more infrastructure, more services, and more schools?

3. Overpopulation has many additional social impacts as well. Wilderness, quiet, privacy and the need for occasional solitude are important to individuals in a civilized society. More than simply concern for an excessive “ecological footprint,” we need wild spaces and living space to nurture our spirit.

4. Pushing people together also perpetuates a loss of personal freedom. Just because we can live in a small cluster home, survive with more traffic, cope with more regulations or tolerate a government with a more diluted political representation, does not mean that we should. Don’t we want a quality of life for ourselves and our children that is much better than just tolerable?

5. Conflict and stresses are much more likely when people are pushed closer together. When we are in a denser environment, our neighbor’s actions have a more adverse impact upon us. We are forced to limit our actions with respect to the rights of others, to put up with losing some rights, or having additional regulations to enforce our rights. The balance becomes impossible to find.

6. Just reducing consumption will do relatively little over the long term to save the thousands of plant and animal species we are driving to extinc-
tion. Habitat loss, probably the biggest direct problem, is impacted by our individual ecological footprints. While reducing consumption will reduce the size of that footprint, the total habitat loss will only grow if population continues to increase. Much of the world’s habitat loss is greatly aggravated by U.S. population growth.

7. The symptoms of overpopulation are everywhere. Each will need to be confronted with analysis, committees, bureaucratic agencies, standards, regulations and funding. Relieving overpopulation will alleviate many other underlying problems and is actually easier and less expensive to accomplish if we just acknowledge its impact and make the effort to do so.

Overpopulation is not getting the attention it should. There are many organizations with programs aimed at reducing some aspect of consumption. Because many people choose to believe that dealing with consumption is the answer – they often don’t acknowledge that stopping population growth is a necessary component of the solution.

Many of the most intractable global environmental problems, such as climate change and ocean pollution, are largely caused by the U.S. and the developed world. With per capita consumption levels likely to grow significantly worldwide, and likely to shrink only marginally here, the multiplier effect of each U.S. resident continually becomes ever more critical. One less person is more effective than virtually all of the frugality techniques combined.

Population Matters Most to a Practical Solution

Meat, fish, low-yield vegetables, shrink wrap, paper, autos, and personal computers are not morally wrong. The higher the population, the more personal choices we must lose and the lower the resulting quality of life. Just reducing consumption without bringing it down to third-world levels will do little to save our nation or our planet if we continue to downplay the impact of our overpopulation.

U.S. population is now at 330 million, growing by some 2.3 million per year mostly due to immigration. Census Bureau projections indicate that our population is likely to reach 400 million by 2060 if we don’t change course. Analysis from the Global Footprint Network notes that U.S. population is now over double a sustainable level. Attainable reductions in consumption will not do the job if we don’t also stop population growth.

We all want a truly sustainable world that can support a reasonable standard of living with reasonable levels of consumption for all.

Overpopulation is important itself. In the long term, stopping population growth is a necessary part of the sustainability equation. All environmental organizations need to incorporate the population connection into their programs or all will ultimately fail.

Visit worldpopulationbalance.org/us_population for more perspective on the impact of US overpopulation. Visit worldpopulationbalance.org/content/send-letter-environmental-groups for a sample letter you can customize to send to environmental groups. A short reply to fundraising emails noting your disappointment with their “we don’t talk population” stance can gain attention as well.

If environmental organizations and activists won’t keep the population issue front and center, who will?

Mike Hanauer has been a sustainability, climate change and population activist for over 30 years. He has served as director on the National Board of Zero Population Growth (ZPG) of Greater Boston. He previously served as Board Chair of Growth-Busters.org. He has also served as a Director on the National Board of ZPG.

[This article uses updated information from the Negative Population Growth Forum Paper, “Overpopulation and Overconsumption: Where Should We Focus”, which can be found at npg.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/OverpopulationandOverconsumption-revised2013.pdf]
WPB has New Shared Office Space in the Heart of the Twin Cities

NEW MAILING ADDRESS
World Population Balance
2388 University Ave. W., First Floor, #4
Saint Paul, MN 55114 U.S.A.

WPB is Tabling for Sustainable Population

World Population Balance staff has begun reaching more of the public face-to-face with the sustainable population message – through tabling events in the Twin Cities area. Please alert us to any events where you think the sustainable population message is needed. If you live outside the Twin Cities, we’d be glad to share materials and assistance to launch your own tabling activities at events in your area. Email us at office@worldpopulationbalance.org.

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over-developed world where most people mistakenly think overpopulation has been solved. It’s obvious there will be less resistance to having smaller families than there will be to having smaller individual footprints.

World Population Balance has played a leading role in clearing the obstacles that hinder faster progress on the population front. We’ve been successfully dissolving the taboo on conversations about the overpopulation crisis. We’re cranking up the volume on conversations about the solution – voluntarily choosing to have smaller families. We can’t say, “Mission accomplished,” just yet, but we are gaining ground. Thank you for joining us in this effort, whether that’s through your own advocacy work, financial support, or both.

Latest Overpopulation Podcasts

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in danger of being pushed off the planet by the relentless expansion of the human enterprise. Dave Gardner and Alan Ware discuss this news, and ponder whether scientists and journalists are doing their part to alert us to the role of human overpopulation in biodiversity loss and climate change.

Episode 24

Celebrate the ‘Baby Shortage’

The U.S. Birth Rate is dropping. Sound the alarm? Or break out the champagne? NPR and other news outlets have characterized this as a “slump” that will be bad news for our economy. We beg to differ. On an overpopulated planet, fewer births are a ticket on the expressway to sustainability.