June, 2008

Population education — promoting awareness about stabilization to benefit everyone!*

* Pro-life and pro-choice members respectfully agree to disagree in order to promote fair and humane population stabilization.

Thanks, Kevin!

On March 4th Kevin Jordan went to donationline.com to donate his old minivan. Kevin, a high school environmental science teacher in Alameda, California, had never heard of World Population Balance.

However, he is passionately concerned about population growth and is convinced that it is our primary problem. He was delighted to find our name on the list of organizations at donationline. With just a few clicks, he gave us his car and qualified for a charitable gift deduction.

Thank you very much, Kevin! We greatly appreciate your spontaneous generosity! To find out how easy it is to donate your car, truck, boat, motorcycle or airplane, please see article on page 8.

David Bacon:
The Population Bubble

In the Roadrunner and Coyote cartoons there is usually a scene where Coyote, chasing Roadrunner, runs off a cliff. He continues on a horizontal line for a couple of seconds, looking increasingly puzzled and concerned, until he realizes his predicament, tries vainly to reverse course, and falls to the desert below.

This is symbolic of the situation ecologists call “overshoot.” Overshoot is when a species reproduces to a number that its environment can’t sustain.

In 1944, for example, 29 reindeer were introduced onto Saint Matthew Island in the Bering Sea. With few competitors, no predators and plenty to eat, the herd increased to about 6,000 by the summer of 1963, consuming almost all available food. That winter most of them died. The surviving population in 1966 numbered 42.

And now the species with the unique ability to change the environment on a colossal scale appears on the verge of making for itself a St. Matthew Island worldwide. At the end of the 19th century the human population was 1.6 billion. It is now 6.6 billion.

The food that made this amazing increase possible – there’s also sanitation and modern medicine, but food is the base – came primarily by boosting crop yields with petroleum. With fertilizer from natural gas, with crops bred to capitalize on that fertilizer and with petroleum – powered machinery and irrigation wells, we can produce huge yields – more than 7,000 pounds of corn per acre, for example. Just one lifetime ago, corn yields were one-fifth of that. Wheat yields have almost tripled. Similar comparisons can be made for other grains.

But, this can’t last. The aquifers, oil, and natural gas that made possible a fourfold population increase are finite. Over the coming decades, the end of the road for humanity seems certain. Words count on you and your generous financial support to help us expand our impact to create a truly viable, sustainable planet for all! Thank you.
Balanced View

From the President
By David Paxson

The question I get asked most often – both at presentations and in one-on-one conversations – is: What’s the answer?

Bluntly and simply put, here is the answer: Reduce the number of people. But, how do we do that? Through (1) widespread public education/awareness that current human population is far above long-term, sustainable levels and it’s in everyone’s best interest to have fewer births, and (2) widespread availability and acceptance of family planning (not abortion).

As I point out in presentations and interviews: the most important question is not: “Will population stop increasing? Because it will! At some point it will! In a world with finite and declining vital resources, it’s not rocket science to realize that at some point resources will no longer support more people. So the far more important question is: “How will it happen?” Will population stabilize inhumanely – by deaths increasing to balance with births? Or, will population stabilize humanely – by fewer births balancing with historically low death rates? I have not met anyone who thinks increasing deaths would be a humane answer! And, the longer we wait, the less humane our choices will be.

Most European countries already have birth rates that are below their death rates. This means their numbers will decline to sustainable levels in coming decades. When all other countries reduce births below deaths, world population will begin a slow decline – drifting down to a truly sustainable level of one to two billion.

But, what can I do about that? Plenty! First, study the facts and become fully convinced that current population is in overshoot and must be reduced – for the sake of our children and other living things. (This will not be easy: there are hoards of well-meaning but uninformed folks out there who continue to ignore or deny the realities of overshoot and overconsumption. Certainly, this denial makes for much more comfortable feelings and what seems to be a happier life.)

Second, meet with your elected representatives and insist that they support population stabilization policies – that they learn to “think population”. The core problem is not a shortage of resources; it’s a longage of people!

And, every hour we ignore or deny this fact, the bigger the problem becomes (9,000 more people in the world every hour, net gain).

Thirdly, pepper reporters and other media people with personal appointments, calls, letters and emails insisting that they acknowledge that human numbers are already above sustainable levels and, for everyone’s well-being, need to be humanely reduced. I enjoy joining people on these appointments, so if you would like me along, please call me.

Of course, there’s much more you can do, and in past Balanced Views we have highlighted some of them. Many people become tremendously upset once they grasp the full magnitude of our human numbers crisis. They take on a sense of concern and urgency that is inspiring. I have seen some cancel membership renewals to a long list of organizations they have been supporting for many years. They are no longer willing to watch their money go to groups who, though they may be doing noble and worthy things, are not addressing the core issue of population stabilization.

Remember … “No matter what your cause, it is a lost cause unless we stabilize and then reduce population.”

Join us now!

Hold Their Feet to the Fire

Help us exponentially expand our impact with members of the media. Over the years we have cultivated relationships with many media people. This has resulted in some great interviews and coverage of the issue. Yet, we must do much more to move the population issue into the spotlight!

If you want to help with population awareness in a concrete way, this is for you! We want to increase our contacts – appointments, letters and emails – to help our media friends deepen and broaden their understanding of this mega-issue. In the rush of their day-to-day schedules they learn next to nothing about population, yet alone its sweeping impact. Help us reach and teach them and hold their feet to the fire to intelligently cover the issue.

Please call our office and leave your name, phone, and email, and Cindy Koehler will call and help you get plugged in. This election year is the perfect time to elevate population awareness to a higher level. Thank you.

Balanced View

is a publication of World Population Balance
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Our Mission
World Population Balance is committed to educating the general public, policymakers, and the media about current population facts and trends, the consequences of population growth, and the benefits of stabilization. We are a non-profit organization and deliver our message through public presentations and conferences, appointments with elected officials, written articles, our newsletter, web site, media interviews, and advertisements.
In 1798 Thomas Robert Malthus wrote: “population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio, but subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio.” He was well aware that Europeans were taking over the lands of Native Americans and thereby introducing more productive agricultural methods. However, taking over other people’s lands is a finite process, and when he wrote that “subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio,” he was referring essentially to the potential for increasing the productivity of the land through improved farming methods.

Over the last two hundred years, he has not been obviously right, at least to the extent that many have proclaimed that he has not been wrong. But as we will see, there are reasons to suppose that the truth of his proposition has long been apparent to anyone willing to see it, and the consequence of having ignored it will bear down on us in the immediate future.

The essential logic underlying Figure 1 is that if people are to continue to have enough food to eat, then increase in production must match increase in population. For example, if population changes by a factor of 10 (ten fold) then food supply must change by the same factor of 10. Initially, this can be achieved, in part, by taking more land into cultivation, but today that opportunity is no longer significantly available, so it is 

increase in yield per acre (or per hectare, 2.47 acres) that is important. Over the last two hundred years, reasonable estimates for early years and fairly accurate data for the last sixty years are available for wheat and rice yields. So those yields will be used as the indicator for increasing cereal yields.

Questions to be addressed are these:
1. Have cereal yields increased to keep pace with an unchecked rise in population?
2. Is it likely that cereal yields will increase in step with population in 2070?

Little could Malthus have foreseen the improvements that would occur when full use could be made of fossil fuel energy so as to: make nitrogenous fertilizers, produce pesticides, introduce irrigation schemes, build and use tractors and other agricultural machinery, the latter greatly facilitating farming in areas that otherwise would have been unsuitable. Notwithstanding these unforeseen technological developments, which resulted in changing the arithmetical ratio by which productivity could be increased (see Figure 1), his proposition has remained substantially true; and as we will see, this should have been apparent to all about fifty years ago.

One critical question is, what are the factors that have allowed this increase in yield to be achieved, because that will help to determine whether it might continue.

One factor is irrigation, and as Clive Ponting\(^1\) relates, between 1800 and 2000 the area under irrigation increased to 679 million acres, a 33-fold increase. He illustrates the significance of this in terms of yields with the fact that in south Asia only a third of the rice growing area is irrigated, yet it produces almost two-thirds of the total crop.

However there are many examples of irrigation leading to water logging and salinization. In the last quarter of the twentieth century the loss of irrigated land was at a rate of about 1 per cent a year. Since 1978 the newly irrigated area has been increasing at about 1 per cent a year, so overall there has been little net increase during that period.

Apart from the problems of land degradation, limitations are set by the availability of water, since irrigation uses about 70% of water supplies. Between 1800 and 2000, the world’s annual water
consumption increased at least 20-fold. The amount of water used in recent times has only been available because of overdrawing from stocks. A good example is the Ogallala aquifer, which stretches from Texas to South Dakota. The U.S. Geological Survey estimated that there was 3080 cubic km of drainable water left in 1980. So at the present withdrawal rate of about 26 cubic km per year net of recharge, which is about one eighth of withdrawal, the water could theoretically last until about 2100. However, problems may develop before then: from the 1940s to 1980 the water level dropped about 3 metres on average and more than 30 metres in some places.2

The paramount need for water for agriculture becomes clear when we realize that each kilogram of biomass requires about 1000 litres of water to grow, and yet Ponting lists similar problems with water supply in most parts of the world. In many areas of India the water table is falling at 1 metre a year. In northern Gujarat over a thirty-year period the water table fell at an average rate of 13 metres a year. “In Pakistan the water table around Quetta is falling at about three and a half metres per year, and the area will run out of water in a decade.”

China is in equal trouble, and it has already affected agriculture there: “The water level in the aquifer under the North China Plain dropped three metres in just one year (2000), and around Beijing wells need to be a kilometer deep to reach fresh water … The wheat harvest in the area fell by 30 per cent between 1997 and 2003. This is one of the major grain producing areas in China, and as a result the Chinese grain harvest fell by almost 14 per cent in the period – an amount equal to the total Canadian grain harvest.”

Moreover there is little prospect of greatly increasing water supply by building dams, because these have been found to be environmentally as well as socially damaging. On this point Ponting says: “The flooding caused by the reservoirs displaces large numbers of people – probably as many as forty million in the last sixty years (half of them in India) and the current rate is about four million people a year.”

“Modern agriculture has, like its predecessors, produced a mixture of achievements, problems and environmental disasters. ... The need to bring

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* The meaning of factor in this context, taking population as an example, is the number by which the starting population must be multiplied to arrive at the population at the end of any given period. The phrase factor change is used to indicate that the relevant factors are shown over the full period of 270 years.

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Figure 1: The Malthus graph: Factor change* in population and cereal yields

In 1798, Robert Malthus wrote:

“Population, when unchecked, increases in a geometrical ratio, but subsistence increases only in an arithmetical ratio.”

The graph indicates the extent to which he was correct. For just a short period, 1950-85, with the advent of agribusiness, which included use of fertilizers, pesticides, and irrigation, all of which require energy, the increase does approximate to a geometrical increase, but as the text makes clear, there are many factors now operating to bring that to an end.
more land into production and intensification of that production has produced numerous environmental problems – deforestation, soil erosion, desertification, salinization and the overloading of land and water with fertilizers, pesticides, and herbicides.”

The factors outlined above indicate that yields are unlikely to continue to increase as they have in the past. Moreover other factors need to be taken into account besides the overreaching one that most soils are being used unsustainably, with the soil being continually lost. Some factors seem likely to significantly increase the number of malnourished and underfed people:

1. Large segments of the world population are becoming richer and starting to eat more meat, which requires more cereals, leaving less for the poorer malnourished.

2. So as to avoid facing up to the reality, people allow themselves to be deluded into thinking that liquid biofuels can make a significant difference to reducing carbon emissions by replacing fossil fuels, hence significant amounts of food crops are likely to be used to provide liquid biofuels.

3. Global warming tends to cause crops to be lost or yields to be reduced due either to an excess of water, or too little, or just because farming is difficult when the weather is less predictable than it was in the recent past.

4. Well before 2070, the scarcity of oil and gas will become apparent. Indeed by 2070 the supply of these is likely to be below half of what it is today, causing very high prices. The consequent increased demand for coal will cause considerable increase in price, not only because of greater demand, but also because extracting coal from more difficult seams will require more energy to be used as input. With respect to efficiency, there is the further factor that with increased use of coal it will become even more important to sequester carbon dioxide emitted; so the efficiency of supplying energy will be reduced for that reason too.

It was apparent long before all the above factors became evident that there was an inescapable truth in the logic of what Malthus said, namely that the unchecked population growth would outstrip increase in food supply. How world population would change without severe restrictions on growth was clear to Malthus and became empirically demonstrated around 1950, as is apparent from Figure 1. For it is at that point, when the problem of food supply appeared temporarily to have been solved, that the graph takes a sharp upward turn. From 1950 to 2000 the average rate of increase in population was 1.77% per year. Were it not for the constraints that operated from 1800 to 1950 – namely shortage of food, inadequate hygiene, and lack of control of diseases – we can surmise that population would have grown at about that rate, 1.77% a year right from 1800. At that rate, by 2070 it would have reached an obviously impossible 114 billion.

Incidentally, now in 2007 the population in the less developed world of 4 billion, excluding China, is expanding at 1.8% per year. Some agricultural scientists have noted that between 1950 and 1984 the growth of cereal yields did increase in a close approximation to a geometrical ratio, but that period was a very small part of the two hundred ten years that we are surveying. For the last twenty-three years, since 1984, per capita grain production has been falling continuously, and grains make up 80% of world foods.

So Malthus was clearly right. But how blind have humans been since about 1960, when they had before them the plain evidence that population during the last decade had grown at a rate of 1.8%? Simple calculation then would have shown that if that rate were to continue, then by 2070 the population would reach an impossible 21 billion.

And how blind do we remain today? The Population Reference Bureau Data Sheet shows population growing at a rate of 1.2% a year. Were that rate to continue, then by 2070 world population would expand from its present 6.6 billion (in 2007) to reach an impossible 14 billion by 2070.

For many decades there has been a willful blindness to recognize that population is the pre-eminent problem. For instance, both the UK and USA governments have completely overlooked a Royal Commission and a Presidential Commission respectively, both of which warned years ago that existing population levels were already high enough. It is time those reports were taken from the shelves and every effort made to repair the sins of omission that have occurred since they were published.

The factor that will prevent human population from rising much above the line on the graph which is based a projection of the growth rate dropping off to zero by 2070 is not human foresight, but rather the very one that Malthus feared, namely intensification of the misery which his checks have always been causing.

The human population may well not reach the projected 9.6 billion shown in Figure 1, because of the many factors now coming into force that will make even the maintenance of present levels of food production difficult. Chief among those factors is the declining availability of fossil fuels. And that provides another case of willful blindness, for many distinguished petroleum geologists have been doing all they can...
over the last forty years to draw our attention to the predictability of peak oil, peak gas and the problems of exploiting the remaining coal deposits, e.g. M. King Hubbert, “Buzz” Ivanhoe, Colin Campbell, Walter Youngquist, Jean Laherrere and Kenneth Deffeyes. Two courses of action are obviously urgent: (1) reduce fossil fuel use so that what remains lasts longer; (2) reduce population to a level that can be supported without fossil fuels.


Editor’s response: Great idea, Karen. We have put your letter on our web site for easy retrieval by our readers.

A message from Karen Shragg:

I have decided to send no more funds to any organization that does not address the population issue. So I respond with the following to the myriad of solicitations all asking for my money. You are free to reprint and use:

Dear ________

I have made up my mind to support only those organizations that include a message about population growth and how it is undermining everything good we are trying to do on this planet. Otherwise we are ultimately just polishing the furniture on the Titanic. Thank you for your good work. But alas, I see no indication that you acknowledge population growth as a core, driving issue in your solicitation material. Nor do you attempt to educate your readers on this critical issue.

Therefore, I am not including a donation at this time. I will be thrilled to do so at some future date when you decide to add something like the following to your solicitation letters: “Remember: our planet is growing by 9,000 people per hour, net gain, each hour of every day. We recognize that this must be humanely addressed with public education and policy changes if your organization’s important goals are to be achieved with any lasting integrity. Please go to <http://www.worldpopulationbalance.org/> for more detailed information on this crucial issue.”

Again, thank you very much for your important efforts to make the world a more just and sustainable place for all.

Karen Shragg, WPB Advisory Board Member

Editor’s response: Great idea, Karen.

How to gauge global success: Do the math

The Minneapolis StarTribune published the following Counterpoint article written by David Paxson and Advisory Board member, Dr. Karen Shragg on February 16th:

The Economist article, “Our planet isn’t such a bad place after all,” in the Feb. 4 StarTribune was deceptive and misleading about measuring success on our planet.

When considering how well the planet is doing, it is imperative to look long-term and biggest picture. This picture needs to include the global rate of consumption of natural resources and the population growth rate. Certainly there are individual examples of how some conditions for humans have improved, as mentioned in the article. But even if millions of people have been removed from poverty, all victories are temporary without addressing population growth and the increased consumption it fuels.

Those limited to only an economic perspective have a false and misleading take on the future of humankind. This article dupes us into cheering for temporary improvement of people’s lives without addressing whether this improvement is sustainable in the long term. To measure true success, we must consider how fast we are consuming our natural resource base.

Right now we know that we are gaining more people than we are losing – by 9,000 per hour and 200,000 more per day. This adds up to more than 70 million additional mouths to feed, clothe, shelter and provide with health care and a decent job – each year. None of our primary resources can keep up with this pressure. All of Earth’s systems are stressed, to the point of already creating tremendous weather pattern disruptions.

Many countries are making exciting strides to both reduce consumption and stabilize population. Humanely addressing both of them is a truly winning combination.

We are optimistic in our outlook for humankind because we are convinced that, as tens of millions of Americans learn these realities, they will reject the false and misleading statements from the deceptive economic prognosticators of our society.

We will have meaningful success when enlightened Americans and their leaders work to humanely stabilize human numbers to reach a sustainable balance with Earth’s resources.

Karen Shragg is a naturalist and David Paxson is president of World Population Balance in Minneapolis.
Colby Chairs Board

Rev. Ralph Colby was elected Board Chair at our May meeting. A native of Boston, Ralph moved to Minnesota in 1964 as minister of the Congregational Church in Austin, and subsequently as minister of St. Anthony Park Church in St. Paul. In addition to parish ministry, Ralph has served as chief operating officer of Project for Pride in Living, a social service agency in the Twin Cities, and has held other church-related positions here and on the East Coast. He retired from his position at Plymouth Congregational Church in Minneapolis in 2006.

Ralph is eager to share his skills and time with WPB because of his admiration of David Paxson’s tenacity in his calling to educate the public about the seriousness of world-wide population pressure and resource overshoot. “In my lifetime,” he says, “world population has more than tripled, and these numbers are clearly unsustainable. I wonder why everyone is not concerned about our future as a planet and about the direction our wanton overuse of resources is taking us. We simply cannot continue to multiply as we have done in the past.”

“Many, if not most, of our societal problems have their roots in the increasing number of passengers on the planet earth. With all the talk about the need for conservation, re-cycling, alternative fuels, etc., it is amazing that the population issue is seldom raised. It’s great that David and WPB are addressing it head-on.”

Rising food prices starve charities

On May 5th the StarTribune published a front page article about charities being compelled to reduce their food aid due to higher food prices. David Paxson sent the following letter to the editor. However, the Star Trib chose not to publish it:

Rising Food Prices: Bad-Good-Bad News

What an utter tragedy that “Rising food prices starve charities” (May 5 StarTribune)! But within this horrifying prospect of starving millions is a bit of “good news” – of a sort. As food shortages, starvation and riots rise – and as oil prices and peak oil-driven shortages increase – readers may find it increasingly difficult to ignore the core, underlying, driving problem: too many people for Earth’s finite and declining resource base. Simply put, our problem is not a shortage of resources; it’s a longgage of people.

Inside this “good news” is more bad news, however. World population increases by 9,000 more people every hour, net gain, which means humane options to solve this core, driving problem are reduced each passing hour.

No one wants to see population stabilize inhumanely by more deaths. The humane answer is to reduce births to a truly sustainable population level. Let’s hope and pray that we wake up to these realities sooner rather than later.

World Population Balance

Contribution, Membership, & Change-of-Address Form

Please detach and return this form with your tax-deductible contribution. Please make checks payable to World Population Balance and mail them to World Population Balance P.O. Box 23472 Minneapolis, MN 55423 U.S.A.

If there are mistakes in your name and address on the back of this form, please make corrections. Also, please add phone(s) and e-mail address(es). Thank you.

Sign up your friends or relatives for a free year’s subscription!

Thank you.

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Thank you.
Donate Your Vehicle to World Population Balance!

Turn your unwanted vehicle, running or not, into a tax-deductible contribution to World Population Balance! In addition to cars, you can donate trucks, vans, boats, motorcycles, and airplanes. Have your ownership title handy and follow these simple steps:

By Phone
2. Make sure to request the World Population Balance extension 2255.
3. Provide your name, address, phone number and vehicle information from the title.

Online
2. Click on "Click to donate your used vehicles" and complete the Vehicle Donation Form.
3. Under Charitable Organization Selection, make sure to select World Population Balance from the dropdown list. The list is alphabetical, so speed scroll to the end of the list, or type a W in the charitable organization selection box to get you closer to the WPB listing.

A towing company will contact you within two business days to arrange a pick-up (at no expense to you). Within 6-8 weeks we will mail you a donation acknowledgement letter for your records. Thank you in advance for your generosity and much needed support.