



Switzerland, the populace consumes 4.5 times the resources that could be produced inside the nation.

"A lot of these people say, 'We have money, we'll just buy what we need,'" Wackernagel said. He said that per capita global consumption rates haven't changed much since the 1970s. That means the increased consumption rate of the planet is largely being driven by population growth.

'At some point there are limits'

The Population Bomb is widely viewed today as little more than a curiosity, reflective of a brief moment of social panic. Forecasts warning that 4 billion people on the planet would cause calamitous environmental collapse obviously were way off the mark. Still, Ehrlich's warnings shouldn't be shelved forever.

"When a stand of trees is planted too densely for its environment, at

some point there's going to be a massive die-off," said David Keller, a former Petaluma city councilman who has advocated for various environmental causes. He said an even worse event resembling the flu pandemic that infected a third of the planet's population in 1918 and killed 50 million could strike again.

"There are carrying capacities," Keller said. "We see it in animal populations over and over and over again—you exceed the carrying capacity, and populations collapse." With humans, he said, the effects may be "increases in diseases, accidents, anxiety or migration away—at some point there are limits to what a habitat can support."

In the past 12,000 years of agriculturally based society, the human population has grown about 2,000-fold, from an estimated 4 million to 7.3 billion today.

Mid-range forecasts from the United Nations show the population stabilizing at 11 billion or 12 billion in about 100 years. Higher-end estimates suggest a peak at 16 billion. Another UN projection, though, suggests a peak at 8.8 billion by 2050 and then a steady decline, dipping back to the present level by 2100.

Wackernagel noted that if every country's citizens reproduced and consumed resources as people do in Portugal, Spain and Italy, the planet would see a mighty reprieve, with a population decline to about 4.5 billion people by 2100.

"And the consumption level would drop from 1.6 planets today to 0.9 planets," he said.

Perhaps most notably, a truly global human population decline would require the social and political empowerment of women everywhere, through education and family planning.

If populations do begin declining, recent Republican presidential administrations will deserve none of the credit. They have repeatedly cut funding or otherwise impeded

international family planning programs. Ronald Reagan, George W. Bush and Donald Trump all have disrupted efforts to provide women in developing nations with birth control and access to safe abortions. Barack Obama restored funding to the United Nations Population Fund after his predecessor held back \$244 million in aid to the program over seven years.

But upon Trump's entrance into the White House, he signed an executive order prohibiting any organization that receives United States funding from even so much as recommending abortions—even if the organizations use their own money for any such efforts. The president's action has been widely rebuked as an assault on women in countries where getting pregnant at a young age means an end to education and all the quality-of-life perks that may come with it.

In pushing their conservative stance on family planning, Republicans are inadvertently encouraging Third World population growth. But when people born into poverty seek brighter opportunities in the United States, the same political party tries to lock them out.

Feldstein expects no better of an administration that has stripped immigrant children from their parents and locked them in cages. But notwithstanding such policies, she is optimistic about the future trajectory of the human population. In spite of Republican efforts to inhibit the aid programs that help boost women's social standing in developing nations, she said "we are seeing a drop in fertility rates."

Leaders and policy makers should consider alternative metrics for measuring the success of societies, she said.

"A few countries are measuring things like happiness indexes, and how we are providing for people, because it's not just about whether the economy or capitalism suffers, it's about whether people are suffering," Feldstein said.

In Oakland, Bertulis hopes that society at large will respect and even encourage the personal decision not to reproduce. He said he doesn't want humanity to dwindle away.

"Some people should be having children, absolutely, to perpetuate humanity," he said. "But if you don't have kids, good on you—well-played." □



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