

Population

– Population Expansion and its Impact on the Environment

When we speak about population expansion we talk and think about human population growth. Why is this the case? Why is the human population so superior that it needs to, and wants to, expand, whilst seemingly all other species experience population decline, mostly as a consequence of the growth of the human population. Population Action International states that there are more human babies born each day – about 350,000 than there are individuals left in all the great ape species combined, including gorillas, chimpanzees, bonobo and orang-utans (source: www.population.org.au). This is a telling statistic. In 1000 years the human race has multiplied 20-fold. Today's 6 billion people may be 9 billion by 2050. Over the past fifty years, the human population has grown from 2.5 billion to 6 billion people (see table below). Whilst the population debate continues, there is little in terms of scientific evidence to support the true carrying capacity of the planet. Many say that the planet is already over crowded, risking environmental disasters such as global warming. On the extreme opposite side some optimists believe that with some restraints and the astute use of technology, the figure may be as high as a whopping 100 billion. Some argue that the rise in numbers is not necessarily a bad thing. Does population growth promote economic wealth by workforce expansion? Notwithstanding, numbers are not the only measure. More than 80% of the world's people currently live in developing countries and 85% will live in developing countries by 2025. The United States has less than 5% of the planet's population, but yet (as we have seen in recent times) dominates the other 95%.

Year	1950	2000	2015	2025	2050
World Population (000)	2 519 495	6 056 715	7 207 361	7 936 741	9 322 251
Population growth rate (percentage)	-	140%	19%	10.1%	17.5%
Life expectancy at birth	46*	66.0	68.7	71.3	76.0

Source: United Nations Population Division (UNPD)
Sourced from www.wri.org

The millennium edition of The Economist dramatises a few concepts. The most prolific is (given today's population has a much higher life expectancy) that those alive today account for one-sixth of all the time that humans have spent on earth! The human life expectancy has escalated from a mere 47 to over 65 in the past fifty years. This is a contributor to population growth. This coupled with increased consumption patters have a potential cumulative effect on the environmental. The world economic output has more than doubled in the past 25 years. An estimated calorie per day per person has grown by nearly 40% in the past fifty years. The richest 1% of the population receive as much income as the entire bottom 57%; i.e. less than 50 million richest people receive as much income as 2,700 million poor. Money spent on household consumption increased 68% between 1980 and 1998.

From these extremities, it would seem that achieving true sustainability is perhaps a dream alone. But, there is every indication from man's capacity to adapt and continue with progress that it will be achieved in some form. As engineers and environmental professionals we have a duty to contribute to the population debate. An on-line discussion forum has been set up by Sustainable Population Australia, which can be accessed at HYPERLINK <http://www.population.org.au> <http://www.population.org.au>

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