

Why you shouldn't obsess about "overpopulation"

Lyman Stone – Vox website - Jul 11, 2018

<https://www.vox.com/the-big-idea/2017/12/12/16766872/overpopulation-exaggerated-concern-climate-change-world-population>

We can't solve our climate-change problems by having fewer babies. [...] Clearly, fear of overpopulation is widespread. But the truth is that overpopulation in the United States is not even close to a serious problem. Even globally, overpopulation is an overstated problem.

It's simplest to start with just the United States. How many people can the country support? Because I am an agricultural economist by profession, my bias is to first think about food. One simple question is how many people can the United States feed? Well, our net agricultural exports account for about 25 percent of the physical volume of agricultural production, which suggests that if we redirected those exports internally, the US could probably support approximately 25 percent more people. That's assuming current technology and current diets and current land use. [...]

One challenge is that lower fertility leads to higher consumption and economic output. [...] But unfortunately, even if we combine lower fertility, more efficient technology, and lower economic growth, by the 2030s we are once again overshooting necessary emissions.

Fertility declines may offset themselves even when couples have zero children. An American couple that forgoes a child might take an extra vacation, say, a road trip across Peru — burning extra fossil fuel for airfares and extra driving. The couple's plane ticket alone to Peru would produce between 3 and 7 metric-ton equivalents of CO₂. [...]

And since US population and GDP growth are already extremely low in comparison to the rest of the world, marginally raising fertility will have an infinitesimally small impact on the growth path of carbon emissions.

[...] even if US population stopped growing at around 325 million people in 2017 and flatlined out, it would produce at best a marginal change in global emissions. Plus, accomplishing that trend would require draconian anti-fertility policies and extremely strict immigration laws. On the other hand, even if US population rises over 500 million people, the impact on the world is barely noticeable. [...]

There is only one way to effectively prevent, alleviate, or reverse dangerous climate change: technological, geographic, and social advancement. Population has little to do with it — especially not in the US.