

The Population Myth

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It's no coincidence that most of those who are obsessed with population growth are post-reproductive wealthy white men: it's about the only environmental issue for which they can't be blamed. The brilliant earth-systems scientist James Lovelock, for example, claimed last month that "Those who fail to see that population growth and climate change are two sides of the same coin are either ignorant or hiding from the truth. These two huge environmental problems are inseparable and to discuss one while ignoring the other is irrational."¹ But it's Lovelock who is being ignorant and irrational.

A paper published yesterday in the journal *Environment and Urbanization* shows that the places where population has been growing fastest are those in which carbon dioxide has been growing most slowly, and vice versa. Between 1980 and 2005, for example, sub-Saharan Africa produced 18.5 percent of the world's population growth and just 2.4 percent of the growth in CO₂. North America turned out four percent of the extra people, but fourteen percent of the extra emissions. Sixty-three percent of the world's population growth happened in places with very low emissions.²

Even this does not capture it. The paper points out that around one sixth of the world's population is so poor that it produces no significant emissions at all. This is also the group whose growth rate is likely to be highest. Households in India earning less than 3,000 rupees a month use a fifth of the electricity per head and one seventh of the transport fuel of households earning Rs30,000 or more. Street sleepers use almost nothing. Those who live by processing waste (a large part of the urban underclass) often save more greenhouse gases than they produce.

Many of the emissions for which poorer countries are blamed should in fairness belong to us. Gas flaring by companies exporting oil from Nigeria, for example, has produced more greenhouse gases than all other sources in sub-Saharan Africa put together.³ Even deforestation in poor countries is driven mostly by commercial operations delivering timber, meat, and animal feed to rich consumers. The rural poor do far less harm.⁴

The paper's author, David Satterthwaite of the International Institute for Environment and Development, points out that the old formula taught to all students of development—that total impact equals population times affluence times technology ($I=PAT$)—is wrong. Total impact should be measured as $I=CAT$: consumers times affluence times technology. Many of the world's people use so little that they wouldn't figure in this equation. They are the ones who have the most children.

While there's a weak correlation between global warming and population growth, there's a strong correlation between global warming and wealth. I've been taking a look at a few super-yachts, as I'll need somewhere to entertain Labour ministers in the style to which they're accustomed. First I went through the plans for Royal Falcon Fleet's RFF135, but when I discovered that it burns only 750 litres of fuel per hour⁵ I realized that it

wasn't going to impress Lord Mandelson with an eyebrow in Brighton with the Overmarine. The Overmarine sucks up 850 litres per hour.⁶ But the most impressive in my eye is made by Wally Yachts in Monaco. It burns 118 (which gives total wallies a sensation of 3400 litres per hour when travelling at six knots) and one litre per second. Another way of putting it is one kilometre.⁸

Of course to make a real splash I need teak and mahogany fittings, carry a few submarines, ferry my guests to the marina in a helicopter, offer them bluefin tuna sushi, and drive the beast so fast that I mash up the Mediterranean. As the owner of one of the fastest yachts in the world, I can do damage to the biosphere in ten minutes that would take a lifetime. Now we're burning, baby.

Someone I know who hangs out with the rich knows that in the 'banker's belt' of the lower Thames, the people who heat their outdoor swimming pools burn gas all round the year. They like to lie in the sun, looking up at the stars. The fuel costs them a few hundred thousand people living like them. They run our life support systems faster than the African peasantry. But at least they have good manners not to breed very much. They bang on about human reproduction like a madman.

In May the *Sunday Times* carried a headline "Billionaire club in bid to curb overpopulation" and "some of America's leading billionaires decide which good cause they should support". It emerged that they would back a

wasn't going to impress Lord Mandelson. I might raise half an eyebrow in Brighton with the Overmarine Mangusta 105, which sucks up 850 litres per hour.⁶ But the raft that's really caught my eye is made by Wally Yachts in Monaco. The WallyPower 118 (which gives total wallies a sensation of power) consumes 3400 litres per hour when travelling at sixty knots.⁷ That's nearly one litre per second. Another way of putting it is 31 litres per kilometre.⁸

Of course to make a real splash I'll have to shell out on teak and mahogany fittings, carry a few jet skis and a mini-submarine, ferry my guests to the marina by private plane and helicopter, offer them bluefin tuna sushi and beluga caviar and drive the beast so fast that I mash up half the marine life of the Mediterranean. As the owner of one of these yachts I'll do more damage to the biosphere in ten minutes than most Africans inflict in a lifetime. Now we're burning, baby.

Someone I know who hangs out with the very rich tells me that in the banker belt of the lower Thames valley there are people who heat their outdoor swimming pools to bath temperature, all round the year. They like to lie in the pool on winter nights, looking up at the stars. The fuel costs them £3,000 a month. One hundred thousand people living like these bankers would knacker our life support systems faster than ten billion people living like the African peasantry. But at least the super-wealthy have the good manners not to breed very much, so the rich old men who bang on about human reproduction leave them alone.

In May the Sunday *Times* carried an article headlined "Billionaire club in bid to curb overpopulation." It revealed that "some of America's leading billionaires have met secretly" to decide which good cause they should support. "A consensus emerged that they would back a strategy in which population

growth would be tackled as a potentially disastrous environmental, social and industrial threat.”⁹ The ultra-rich, in other words, have decided that it’s the very poor who are trashing the planet. You grope for a metaphor, but it’s impossible to satirise.

James Lovelock, like Sir David Attenborough and Jonathan Porritt, is a patron of the Optimum Population Trust (OPT). It is one of dozens of campaigns and charities whose sole purpose is to discourage people from breeding in the name of saving the biosphere. But I haven’t been able to find any campaign whose sole purpose is to address the impacts of the very rich.

The obsessives could argue that the people breeding rapidly today might one day become richer. But as the super-wealthy grab an ever greater share and resources begin to run dry, this, for most of the very poor, is a diminishing prospect. There are strong social reasons for helping people to manage their reproduction, but weak environmental reasons, except among wealthier populations.

The Optimum Population Trust glosses over the fact that the world is going through demographic transition: population growth rates are slowing down almost everywhere and the number of people is likely, according to a paper in *Nature*, to peak this century,¹⁰ probably at around ten billion.¹¹ Most of the growth will take place among those who consume almost nothing.

But no one anticipates a consumption transition. People breed less as they become richer, but they don’t consume less; they consume more. As the habits of the super-rich show, there are no limits to human extravagance. Consumption can be expected to rise with economic growth until the biosphere hits the buffers. Anyone who understands this and still considers that population, not consumption, is the big issue is, in Lovelock’s words, “hiding

from the truth.” It is the worst kind of poor for the excesses of the rich.

So where are the movements rich destroying our living systems? against super-yachts and private jets? you need it?

It’s time we had the guts to name it’s money. It’s not the poor; it’s the rich.

from the truth." It is the worst kind of paternalism, blaming the poor for the excesses of the rich.

So where are the movements protesting about the stinking rich destroying our living systems? Where is the direct action against super-yachts and private jets? Where's class war when you need it?

It's time we had the guts to name the problem. It's not sex; it's money. It's not the poor; it's the rich.