THE DAILY BEAST

New Poll Finds Americans Are Worried About Runaway Population Growth

The planet's population could hit 10 billion by 2050, and a national poll by the Center for Biological Diversity finds a majority of Americans believe the growth could make some species extinct, is making climate worse, and is an important environmental issue.

by Jerry Karnas

There's a price for screwing around like we are. And Americans know it.

Every day, we add 200,000 more people to the planet—that's like adding a city the size of Phoenix every week. We've already tipped the 7 billion mark, and we're on pace for 10 billion by 2050, perhaps 14 billion by 2100.

Think of what it takes to accommodate that many more people: the roads, the pollution, the strip malls, the fresh water, the oil, the land to grow food, the ungodly amount of electronic gadgets and gizmos that have become practically intertwined in our DNA.

And all of these come at a price. The more people we add, the more fossil fuels we dig up, the more wild land we log and pave and mine, the worse the climate gets, the more pesticides we use, the more land we take from wildlife, the more species that are put on an accelerated ride toward utter extinction.

But there is some good news. The American people understand. They're connecting the dots. They get that we can't keep growing our human population as if there's never a price to be paid.

A new national poll commissioned by the Center for Biological Diversity (where I work) and conducted by uber pollsters Public Policy Polling finds a majority of Americans believe the world's growing human population is driving wildlife species toward extinction

A 4-day-old baby in a maternity ward in Brandenburg, Germany, in 2011. (Sean Gallup/Getty)

(60 percent) and is making climate change worse (57 percent). Respondents also said addressing the human population—which topped 7 billion in 2011—is an important environmental issue (59 percent).

But wait, you might be saying, didn't I just read a slew of recent pieces on The Daily Beast sounding the alarm on how the U.S. was a facing a population catastrophe, that we weren't breeding enough?

Didn't I just read how hoards of city slickers were choosing childless lives, and about a book titled, What to Expect When No One's Expecting? Didn't regular Beast contributors Joel Kotkin, Megan McArdle, and Justin Green all write pieces about how the real problem is not population growth but population decline?

What's going on here?

Well, seems there are a few media-savvy growth boosters who like the man-bites-dog allure of a narrative that says, "Nope, the problem isn't too many people, it's that we're not producing humans fast enough." These folks have a world view where population growth is all wisdom and no vice. Grow or die, they say. The bad news is that these folks have a habit of generating a lot of press. The good news is that the American people aren't buying it.

Do Americans feel the planet is growing too fast? You bet they do. Our poll found 50 percent said the world's population was growing too fast. Only 4 percent said too slow. The belief in the tooth fairy would poll higher than that.

Only 4 percent said population growth is too slow. Belief in the tooth fairy would poll higher than that.

The U.S. adds 5,000 people a day to the population ranks. That's like adding a city of Philadelphia every year. And we certainly take a toll on the planet. Americans consume 18.8 million barrels of oil per day—more than the next four highest oil consumers combined. The same is pretty much true for meat, grains, water, coal, natural gas, and a host of other resources.

Are Americans aware of our disproportionate levels of consumption? Yes they are. Are Americans OK with these levels of consumption? Forty-eight percent of the poll respondents said the average American consumes too many natural resources. Only 17 percent said we consume too few.

Are Americans concerned about the rate that wildlife is disappearing? Absolutely. 61 percent were concerned about vanishing plants and animals.

Here's the key question. Do the American people believe population growth is impacting the disappearance of wildlife? Yes: 57 percent said population growth was a significant cause of plant and animal extinctions. Asked another way, 60 percent agreed with the following statement: "Human population growth is driving other animal species to extinction."

We also asked about future growth and its impacts. Our poll found 64 percent of Americans believe a 10 billion-person planet would result in adverse effects. Only 8 percent thought this population level would be beneficial.

What about climate change? Do Americans connect the cooking of the planet to making babies willy-nilly? Without a doubt: 57 percent of those polled said population growth was making climate change harder to solve.

Do Americans think stabilizing population will help protect the environment? Fifty-four percent believe stabilization will.

Nothing on Earth happens in a vacuum. It's a closed system that begins to buckle under the sheer weight of human demands. Scientists are increasingly linking population growth and overconsumption to our environmental challenges. In just the past few months' scientists have found:

• The Colorado River system is under assault by a growing population, and there are serious doubts it can meet the West's demand for water in the coming decades.

• Florida's aquifer, the water supply for 19 million people, is experiencing saltwater intrusion because of over-pumping.

• The United States will lose 36 million acres of forest to urban sprawl by 2050.

• Sixty-six species of coral should be classified as endangered because population and consumption of resources are a driving factor in the threats they face.

• The Gunnison sage grouse merits endangered-species protection in part because the human population has doubled in its habitat and will double again in the next 20 years.

• Florida panthers experienced the second year in a row of record-breaking road kills deaths due to increased traffic and development in panther habitat.

What is most heartening about our poll is that the American people get it. There is no disconnect between what the scientists are measuring and finding, and what Americans are perceiving and experiencing. They aren't freaking out about population declines. They are increasingly of the view that the world's population and consumption levels are seriously out of whack with the ecological safety net the Earth provides free of charge to us all.

And, finally it comes to this: We asked, if mass extinctions of plants and animals were unavoidable due to population growth, do we have a moral responsibility to address the problem? Sixty percent said yes.

In the end that is the most important conclusion. Americans believe we should do the right thing. And in this case the right thing is to start a real conversation about what's happening to life on Earth. If we don't, in the end we will only be screwing ourselves.