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50,000 Ways to Start Talking About Population



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Is it getting crowded in here?

By the time today's over, there will be about 200,000 more people on the planet than there were yesterday. The world population topped 7 billion in 2011 and we're on our way toward 10 billion by the end of this century.

All this rapid population growth comes at a price: we're gobbling up wild land and water, polluting our air, altering our climate and squeezing out plants and animals that have, until now, survived on our planet for thousands of years.

We're long past due to talk about population, consumption and a smarter way of growing and surviving on Earth.

Even the federal government is starting to pick up on it. Last month, the National Marine Fisheries Service proposed Endangered Species Act protections for 66 coral species, acknowledging they face a variety of threats like climate change and changing ocean waters. Then, though, the agency pointed out:

The common root or driver of most, possibly all, of these threats is the number of humans populating the planet and the level of human consumption of natural resources, both of which are increasing in most areas around the globe.

Around the same time, the U.S. Forest Service predicted 34 million acres of forest in the United States would be lost to sprawl in the next 50 years. To top the trifecta off the Department of the Interior released a troubling report on the future of the Colorado River, which provides water for some 40 million people in the West. The report found that that rising demand and falling supply will result in the mighty Colorado fail-

ing to meet the needs of a burgeoning human population. (The study offered up a few desperate schemes, including harvesting water from icebergs.)

And my home state of Florida -- where 600 new residents arrive every day -- there's disturbing new evidence that the aquifer that 19 million people rely on for drinking water is becoming salty because of over-use, rising sea levels and out-of-control growth.

The place where I work, the Center for Biological Diversity, advocates for endangered species. We've seen the toll population growth -- and all its hallmark symptoms -- have taken on plants and animals. Sea turtles struggle to find nesting places on ever-more-crowded coasts, Florida panthers have lost crucial habitat to sprawling developments, California's San Joaquin kit fox has lost its wild habitat to agriculture, an impediment now compounded by increased pesticides in its home range. Forests are shrinking, coral reefs are vanishing, the Arctic is melting.

Clearly we've got to start talking about population, consumption and sustainability.

That's why, as 2012 drew to a close, the Center distributed 50,000 free Endangered Species Condoms, each featuring a polar bear, panther, turtle or other species threatened by population growth. They were given out in every state through a network of more than 600 volunteers who want to prompt a discussion about how population and overconsumption is hurting wildlife, driving climate change and threatening water supplies. Some condoms were given away at restaurants or parties, others were featured during a Sunday sermon or given out during the Rose Bowl parade in Pasadena, Calif.

These funny and provocative packages are a great ice-breaker for a topic that's been taboo for too long. But there's no reason to be scared. We can begin addressing the issue with some sensible solutions: better

access to family planning for all, consumer choices that reduce our environmental footprint, smarter urban growth, a clean energy revolution and policies that emphasize preservation of our air, water, wildlife and healthy climate.

What won't work is sticking our heads in the sand and betting -- hoping -- that a planet with 10 billion people or 15 billion will still be a place we want to live.