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Dear 7 Billionth Baby: Some Lessons on Your 2nd Birthday

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Dear Baby 7 Billion,

You don't remember, but when you were born two years ago this week, your arrival was a pretty big deal: You were, after all, the 7 billionth person on the planet.

You've had a busy couple of years for the environment, especially if you were born in the United States. By your first birthday, you already generated more carbon emissions than a Tanzanian will in her entire lifetime.

And it's not just carbon you're generating. If you're like the majority of American babies, you'll go through as many as 6,000 disposable diapers before you get the hang of the potty. American children also get more than 40 percent of the world's toys. That might sound fun (especially if you haven't learned about sharing yet), but toys -- along with diapers -- have a tendency to wind up on beaches and in the ocean, which is harmful to marine animals.

Seven billion people mean a lot for the planet. You're only two years old, and already the world has changed from the day you were born. Wild animals are losing habitat to development, livestock production, oil and gas drilling, pollution and climate change at unprecedented rates. You may think your grandma

is as old as the dinosaurs, but you have a lot more in common with T-Rex than she does: You were born into the largest mass wildlife extinction crisis since dinosaurs roamed the Earth.

When your grandma was little, she could've seen the last Caribbean Monk Seal, a species driven to extinction by overhunting and other human activities. Today, 20,000 species of plants and animals are at risk of extinction. Who knows what animals will be gone by the time you're a grandparent, or even by the time you're three? Will polar bears still be around when you're a teenager?

None of this is your fault. You just got here! But as one of 7 billion, there's a lot of pressure on the Earth. The good news is that you have your whole life ahead of you to help make the planet healthier for humans and other species.

You already have access to more information and family planning than your grandma did -- the pill didn't even exist when she was born 60 years ago. It's a little early to think about now, but you'll get to choose the size of your family and grow up to support programs that empower women around the world to make that choice, too.

But it'll be more than just how many children you have -- or don't. It's how you choose to live your life.

For instance, Americans eat more meat than almost anywhere else in the world, even though it's a major source of emissions, water use and habitat loss. One hamburger takes about 1,300 gallons of water to produce and has a carbon footprint equivalent to driving a car for hundreds of miles. So, every burger you skip will have a big impact.

You'll make choices throughout your life -- from what you eat to where you live to how many kids you have -- that will help or hurt other species. It's up to you to make sure future generations don't know polar bears and panthers only as stuffed animals.

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