



Things That Go Bump In the Night

Why talking human population growth is so scary

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If every single person on Earth came trick-or-treating at your door, you'd need 277,500,000 pounds of chocolate, peanuts, caramel and nougat to give each of them a single fun-sized Snickers bar. Now multiply that by the fact that a single fun-sized candy bar not only doesn't satisfy but won't sustain life, and you start to get a picture of the scary amount of pressure human population puts on the planet.

Most of the people I talk to about environmental issues are on board with the fact that climate change, deforestation, pollution, ocean acidification and the extinction crisis are all caused by human activities. So it always surprises me that people don't see the growing—no—exploding human population as part of the problem.



Human population has grown from 1 billion to over 7 billion in less than 200 years, gobbling up habitat and spitting out wildlife as it grows. (Photo credit: Anthony Quintano.)

There are 7.4 billion people on the planet right now. And all those people need shelter, food and water. A lot of them, myself included, want a car, calories that don't sustain (like all that Halloween candy) and the all important internet. If it was just one person, that'd be okay. But again, there are 7.4 billion of us and 227 thousand more are added to the planet every day.

If there were fewer of us, we'd have a smaller impact. That's just math. We are one of only a handful of species who have impacted the environment so drastically. Human population growth and our impressive ability to consume

resources are arguably the main drivers of all environmental problems. If we know all this, then why aren't we talking about it, especially in the environmental movement?

Protest in 1971. Forced sterilizations continued in the United States through the 1970's. (Photo credit: Southern Studies Institute.)

Well, the population problem has some skeletons in the closet. Even well-meaning efforts to curb population growth have resulted in coercion and infringement on human rights, especially in minority communities. It gets scarier when you factor in the 20th century's infatuation with eugenics, China's one child policy and anti-immigration movements. But from bad to worse, all of these so-called solutions missed the point (and it's questionable if they even worked at all). What forced sterilization, experimenting with new birth control methods on unsuspecting communities without their knowledge or consent and draconian laws that punish women for pregnancies without giving them the tools or education to control their reproductive health did accomplish was to make it easier for environmental groups (and many others) to feel justified avoiding the issue altogether.

So that's it, right? Just put the past behind us and move forward with new solutions that focus on the empowerment of women and girls and universal access to reproductive health-care and education?

Well, not quite. There is something, an omnipresent force always lurking just out of sight...

The reality is that talking about sex or the number of children people should or shouldn't have is taboo.

In many places, including the US, it is considered crude and way too personal to bring up sex anywhere but the bedroom. And simply suggesting that some people might want to choose to have fewer children or, gasp, no children at all is offensive. Besides, this is America, and no one will tell us how to live our lives.

Giving everyone the tools and education to plan their families is important and key to slowing human population growth—especially in the developing world. But to really have a shot at solving the population problem, we have to change the baby-crazed culture we live in.

That means we need to have some scary conversations. Because by not talking about it, we wind up with whole genres of big family docu-dramas, whoopsie baby shenanigan sitcoms and more paternity test reality shows than any civilization really needs. We'll continue to get pressure from our families wondering when that first, second and third baby will be on the way. On the darker side, avoiding the topic can often leave us with laws that make it harder for people to access family planning services, abstinence-only education that leads to high teen birth rates, and national statistics that include one of the highest birth rates of any industrialized nation.

So. Take a deep breath. It's scary, I know. But it is going to be okay. We can do this together. And it all starts with a conversation about how human population growth is the root cause of all the environmental problems we're facing.