



News Flash:

You Need to Care about Human Population Growth Now



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The 24-hour news cycle may not give a damn about the threat of population growth, but you should.

The United Nations recently released big news about the future of the planet. But without 24-hour coverage, a front page write up or a “presidential” tweet, it didn’t make it onto most people’s radars. In fact, I almost missed it—and I follow this kind of news pretty closely.

Last month the UN finalized the 2017 revision of the World Population Prospects report. Among other things, the report predicts human population growth trends—including where population will be centered and how many people will be added to the planet in the future. And once again, the UN has had to revise those predictions.

Human population is growing even faster than we thought it would be just two years ago. According to the most recent revision, there will be an estimated 9.8 billion people on the planet by 2050.

That's up from 9.7 billion from the revision two years ago. And in the 2013 revision to the report? The prediction was 9.6 billion.

Noticing a pattern? It isn't that the UN is bad at math; human population is growing, and instead of tapering off or even trending down, it's skyrocketing. And for wildlife and the environment pushed to extinction and demolished to make way for humans, this trend is bad news.

Okay, so human population has been skyrocketing for a while now. So what? Sure, it's bad, but compared to the all-out attacks on healthcare, threats to national monuments and public lands, and the elimination of wildlife protections, it doesn't seem like that big of a deal.

It is a big deal.

Our ballooning population affects every one of those issues. The more humans there are on the planet, the more carbon we emit. The more humans there are on the planet, the more land we develop. The more humans there are on the planet, the more threats wildlife face pushing them closer to extinction.



Tokyo, Japan

And while .1 billion might not seem like a scary figure, we should put that into perspective. That's 100 million more people than we previously expected. That's like adding another Beijing, Paris, London, New York, Tokyo, Moscow, Jakarta and Delhi to the world. So we're either talking about the impact of another 8 to 10 megacities, or we're talking about 100 million more people living in abject poverty, or we're talking about an astonishing amount of sprawl taking over our remaining wild places. Or all of the above. And that's on top of the previously projected growth of more than 2 billion people added to today's population.

Luckily, we know what to do to change these trends and work towards a sustainable population: We must empower women and girls, make access to contraception and reproductive healthcare easy and low cost and ensure that everyone—especially girls—gets an education.

However the Trump administration is doing everything it can to prevent that equitable, sustainable future. Recently the United States rejected a UN resolution to protect women and girls from violence because it included a provision to protect women getting legal abortions. More directly, the Trump Administration has been pushing policies since its first week in office to curtail aid and funding to international reproductive healthcare programs that help provide voluntary contraception to developing nations with high fertility rates.



Woman's March DC, January 21, 2017.

And here in the United States, access to affordable contraception could disappear. Planned Parenthood is in the crosshairs and could lose federal funding, and Title X and Medicaid are also on the chopping block. And that's just in the proposed Senate health-care bill.

The Department of Health and Human Services gives more money to abstinence-only education than science based curricula, even though study after study shows abstinence-only programs are ineffective. The Office of Population Affairs is headed by people who don't believe in birth control. That's all while we maintain the highest rate of unintended pregnancies in the developed world, we lack universal parental leave and maternal deaths are on the rise.

The term I usually use for human population growth is runaway, like a runaway train. And like a runaway train, it takes time to slow, stop and ultimately reverse our population boom. Even as average fertility rates are slowly dropping, with all the people already here having children of their own, human population is going to continue to grow at least until 2100. And that's if we start doing something about it now.

And if we don't, well, then we make it harder to take care of people, harder to fight climate change and harder to end the extinction crisis. It might not seem like a big story, but human population is exacerbating all the other problems that do make it into the news.

And that is newsworthy.