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World can't sustain current human population for long

One of the most controversial questions about human population growth is "What is an optimal human population?" Or one might ask, "What is the maximum human population that the earth can support?"

There are many different thoughts and theories on this topic. A group of Catholic priests released a report a few years ago stating that the Earth could support 40 billion people. However, their study focused only on the number of people that could live on the earth if we converted every piece of land to production and did away with most of the luxuries of the modern age, not to mention trinkets like wildlife. Other studies have estimated rather conservatively that only 500 million people could be supported over a long period of time — like several hundred years.

Below are a few excerpts from an article by Rachel Preiser, titled "Living Within Our Environmental Means" and published in the Carrying Capacity Network newsletter, that explored a recent study on the Earth's carrying capacity.

"In a recently published study, 'Natural Resources and an Optimum Human Population,' Cornell professor Dr. David Pimentel has presented some sobering statistics indicating the insufficiency of world resources to sustain a rapidly expanding human population....

"Pimentel's report indicated that even if humans succeed in using rapidly diminishing resources more efficiently, the planet can sustain a 'quality' standard of living for only 2 billion people while still maintaining environmental integrity. The report also concluded, 'For Americans to continue to enjoy a high standard of living and for society to be self-sustaining in renewable energy and food forestry products, given U.S. land, water and biological resources, the optimum U.S. population is about 200 million.'...

"In order for people to live in 'relative prosperity' for a long period of time, the world population (currently 5.6 billion and growing at a rate of 1.7 percent) will have to be reduced to 2 billion. The magnitude of this problem becomes apparent when one considers that the world population is expected to double in the next 42 years. According to Dr. Pimentel's statistics, the U.S. population (now 260 million) would have to be reduced by about 60 million people, even though actual trends suggest that the U.S. population will double over the next 63 years....

"Of the 260 million Americans, 32 million live in poverty, a problem that is not merely one of distribution. If the U.S. population continues to use cropland, water and fossil energy at present rates while permitting population growth along current trends, shortages of essential goods and services will be experienced across the entire population....

"Technological development has enabled humans to push productivity from our land, water and energy resources almost to its environmental limits. However, expanding production to environmental capacity has its price in increasing the environmental degradation that ultimately makes this level of production and the population growth it has encouraged unsustainable....

"Pimentel's report concludes with both a warning and promise:

" 'Decision making tends to be based on crises; decisions are not made until catastrophe strikes. Thus, decisions are ad hoc, designed to protect or promote a particular aspect of human well-being instead of examining the problem in a holistic manner. Based on past experience, we expect that leaders will continue to postpone decisions concerning human carrying capacity of the world, maintenance of a standard of living, conservation of resources, and the preservation of the environment until the situation becomes intolerable, or worse still, irreversible....

" 'Starting to deal with the imbalance of the population-resource equation before it reaches crisis level is the only way to avert a real tragedy for our children's children. With equitable population control that respects basic individual rights, sound resource management policies, support of science and technologies to enhance energy supplies and the environment, and with all people working together, an optimum population can be achieved. With such cooperation efforts we would fulfill fundamental obligations to generations that follow — to ensure that individuals will be free from poverty and starvation in the environment that will sustain human life and dignity.' "

If you would like a copy of "Natural Resources and an Optimum Human Population," write to me at the address below.

If you have a suggestion for a column, a gripe, a success story or whatever, write it down and send it to me, care of the Columbia Daily Tribune, PO Box 798, Columbia, Mo., 65205.