Human Overpopulation Threatens Our Survival
by Piper Hoffman | April 24, 2012

The human population is too big to really comprehend. Seven billion — how does one imagine that many people? And by 2050, we are projected to reach nine billion — two billion more individuals in under 40 years. That is so many that it is practically meaningless.

But it is very meaningful to the survival of life on this planet. In an article titled “Why the Real Victim of Overpopulation Will Be the Environment,” Time Magazine reports that “there’s an undeniable cost to all these people and all this growth: the planet itself.” The Guardian sums up the consequences of overpopulation in a piece called “Why Current Population Growth is Costing Us the Earth”: “Since we passed one billion in 1800, our rising numbers and consumption have already caused climate change, rising sea levels, expanding deserts and the ‘sixth extinction’ of wildlife.”

Not everyone agrees that 9 billion people are too many for Earth to sustain. But there is no arguing with the assertion by Roger Martin, Chair of Population Matters, in that Guardian article: “Indefinite population growth is physically impossible on a finite planet — it will certainly stop at some point.”

We may be nearing that point. The Independent reported that an “environmental assessment by the conservation charity WWF and the Worldwatch Institute in Washington
found that humans were now exploiting about 20 per cent more renewable resources than can be replaced each year.”

That was six years ago. Things have only gotten worse.

The same article attributed to Professor John Guillebaud of University College London the calculation that “it would require the natural resources equivalent to four more Planet Earths to sustain the projected 2050 population of nine billion people.”

Becoming more green isn’t enough. Even if every one of us were more environmentally conscious, consuming and polluting less and conserving more, there would still come a point at which there were simply too many people. The Independent quotes an article by Professor Chris Rapley, director of the British Antarctic Survey, explaining that “Although reducing human emissions to the atmosphere is undoubtedly of critical importance, as are any and all measures to reduce the human environmental ‘footprint’, the truth is that the contribution of each individual cannot be reduced to zero. Only the lack of the individual can bring it down to nothing.”

Unfortunately, that lack of an individual is a taboo topic. Professor Rapley calls reducing population growth “a bombshell of a topic, with profound and emotive issues of ethics, morality, equity and practicability. In interdisciplinary meetings addressing how the planet functions as an integrated whole, demographers and population specialists are usually notable by their absence.”

In an interview with Care2, Searle Whitney, President of population studies organization HowMany.org, illustrated the delicacy with which experts approach the question of halting (much less reversing) population growth. “We would like to see a stable, sustainable birthrate, where births and deaths are more or less equal,” he said, then stopped short of endorsing any policies that might make that happen. “Children are wonderful and raising them is a life-changing experience. We feel that having one or two, or none or three, are all good options,” he said.

As far as the planet’s ability to sustain life, they are not all good options, but as Professor Rapley noted, few will say so. The United Nations came close in 1992, but has since gone quiet on the issue. Back then it issued a “blueprint for sustainable development” called Agenda 21, which advised that “population policy should…recognize the role played by human beings in environmental and development concerns.”
Following the shameful history of eugenics and forced sterilizations in this country and oppressive laws like China’s one-child policy, however, policymakers are loathe to take any step that appears to limit individuals’ freedom to have as many children as they want.

The cost of this inaction could be dire. As Professor Guillebaud says, “We urgently need to stabilise and reduce human numbers.” On many levels, it is a matter of life and death.

Read more: http://www.care2.com/causes/human-overpopulation-threatens-our-survival.html#ixzz1wYO8niRj