

# Don't confuse a symptom with the problem: Overpopulation, not climate change, is the real emergency

## Madeline Weld

Madeline is the president of Population Institute Canada.

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If the mainstream media (MSM) were one's only source of information, one would think that humanity was in mortal danger from a looming climate catastrophe driven by emissions from the burning of fossil fuels on which modern industrial society depends. One would hear little or nothing about a human population growing by one billion ( $1 \times 10^9$ ) every twelve years. There might be the odd reference to the population issue, especially when the milestone of another billion was reached, but alarm bells, if any, would be muted and short-lived.

Given the lack of coverage about population growth, this MSM-limited information consumer would very probably fail to link concerns about human-caused climate catastrophe to the ever-growing number of humans on the planet. This consumer would likely come to believe that the major environmental problem facing humanity is increasingly severe climate change caused by a relatively small subset of the human population through its profligate use of energy and other resources, and that he or she is part of this subset. In other words, that climate change is driven by 'overconsumption' by the rich.

At the same time, this consumer of MSM information would learn that continuous growth in economic throughput is essential, and that the growth of the gross domestic product (GDP) is the prime, if not the only, indicator of human well-being. One of the ways to grow the GDP is through population growth. The MSM-consumer would probably also learn that the low domestic birthrate was a problem, and that immigration was one way to compensate for it. He or she would also come to understand, both through explicit statements and by perceiving societal taboos from what is said and not said, that immigration is good and questioning the government's high annual intake borders on racism.

But this consumer of information from the MSM would be very unlikely to hear that migrants tend to greatly increase their greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions in their new (wealthier) country. In the case of Canada, where I live, due to higher consumption levels and the cold climate, emissions increase on average by a factor of four.<sup>1</sup> These would be the same emissions that are blamed for driving climate change and threatening human survival. Since GHG emissions are bad, but continuous economic growth (which results in more GHG emissions) is essential, other ways, compatible with continuous growth, must be found to reduce the emissions. These ways include investment in 'green' technologies, especially solar and wind. The fact that solar and wind can't meet the annual increase in energy demand, let alone replace the fossil fuels currently being used (see, for example, Rees, 2019), does not receive much coverage in the MSM. The consumer would also be unlikely to read, see or hear much about the environmental costs of extracting the non-renewable resources involved in creating 'green' energy sources such as photovoltaic cells and windmills.

The cognitive dissonance of ignoring (or, in the case of some countries, such as Canada, the US and Australia, actively promoting) population growth while purportedly fighting climate change caused by human activities is not limited to national governments. It afflicts non-governmental and supranational organizations as well. For example, the Scientists' Warning website (<https://www.scientistswarning.org/about-scientists-warning/>) was created to take up the torch from the World Scientists' Warning to Humanity, published in 1992, which included the words, "Pressures resulting from unrestrained population growth put demands on the natural world that can overwhelm any efforts to achieve a sustainable future. If we are to halt the destruction of our environment, we must accept limits to that growth" (Union of Concerned Scientists, 1992). But one has to look very hard on the Scientists' Warning website to find any mention of population. It presents the climate crisis as humanity's major problem and makes one mention of population as one of six steps to address that crisis.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) is also very weak on population. The IPCC played a key role in establishing the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) which came into effect in 1994. The UNFCCC is completely silent about population growth. And so are the Conference of the Parties (COP) meetings which arose from the UNFCCC. The British organization Population Matters created a petition addressed to the British MP who is president of COP26 (hosted by the UK government in Glasgow, November 1–12, 2021) asking the UK government to "accept that population growth is among the drivers of the climate crisis, and acknowledge that slowing it through the empowerment of women and girls can play a critical role in reducing emissions and maximizing the effectiveness of all other climate solutions." But even Population Matters is circumspect in advertising its petition, giving it the title "Urge COP26 leaders to empower women and girls" (<https://is.gd/wtvYjs>).

When a particular symptom of an underlying problem is labelled as the problem itself, and all solutions are directed at the symptom while ignoring the

problem, the problem will not be solved and the symptom will remain. If climate change is driven by human activities, then human numbers are relevant, because it is impossible for a human being to reduce his or her GHG emissions to zero. And those billions of humans whose current emissions are very low because they are very poor can only meet their substantial unmet needs by increasing their consumption levels – and thereby emitting more greenhouse gases. When you multiply something by a billion or more, even a very small number can become large.

Yet climate change is generally presented by the MSM as a problem created by rich countries whose consequences primarily affect poor countries, who will bear the brunt of extreme weather and rising sea levels. (This adds a measure of guilt to the cognitive dissonance of trying to reconcile the need for continuous economic growth with the unacceptable consequences of GHG emissions arising from economic activities.) Thus, we are frequently reminded of facts such as that the average US consumer produces 23 times the amount of GHG emissions as the average Nigerian. What we are not told is that the human population increases by over 80 million each year, almost all of it in poor countries and most of it in Africa, whose current population of 1.3 billion is projected to increase to 3 billion by 2060. And all these people – understandably – want to consume more, which unfortunately entails more GHG emissions. African governments are eyeing their coal deposits to supply energy for their growing populations (Schwikowski, 2021). China, which is now Africa's largest trade and investment partner and for whom Africa is a source of raw materials, plans to construct coal-fired plants on the continent to fuel its development projects there (Goldstone, 2021). Thus, the burgeoning poor of sub-Saharan Africa and other poor rapidly-growing regions will potentially make substantial contributions to GHG emissions in the coming decades.

The size of the human population – about 7.9 billion and counting – is the problem. It is the underlying cause of a host of environmental problems, which can all be considered symptoms of overpopulation. These include pollution of land, air and water, deforestation, erosion, loss of farmland to urbanization, aquatic dead zones due to agricultural runoff, habitat and biodiversity loss, overharvesting of fish and shellfish, depletion of rivers and aquifers, not to mention famines and many conflicts over resources. If anthropogenic climate change is just one of many symptoms of human 'overshoot' in the 'Anthropocene' era, why does it get the lion's share of attention while human population growth is ignored or de-emphasized? As Sir David Attenborough (quoted in BBC, 2009) has famously remarked, "I've never seen a problem that wouldn't be easier to solve with fewer people, or harder, and ultimately impossible, with more."

The current economic paradigm of continuous growth is ecocidal. The GDP as the sole measure of human well-being under that paradigm is not only inadequate but outright harmful. Trying to address the 'climate crisis' while remaining silent on the 'population crisis' is a non-starter. If we want to mitigate what is being called the climate crisis, then every country – including my own, which is one of the highest *per capita* resource consumers and GHG

emitters in the world – should start by seeking to determine and ultimately reach a sustainable population through policies that encourage small families, and by setting a rational level of immigration.

### Note

- <sup>1</sup> This is based upon calculations by John Meyer of Canadians for a Sustainable Society (<https://sustainablesociety.com/>). He took the number of migrants to Canada in 2015 from each of the top ten source countries, multiplied by the *per capita* emissions for that country, and compared the sum of those values to the value obtained by multiplying the same total number of people by the average *per capita* emissions in Canada. The ratio was 4.2 (personal communication).

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