

# How should ecological citizens think about immigration?

**Editor-in-Chief's note:** Between toxic populist calls for immigration controls based on racial criteria, and hyperbolic denunciations of any mention of population issues as 'ecofascist', the room for intelligent and nuanced discussion is being gobbled up from both Left and Right. We have already published three such articles (Crist [2019], Hines [2018], and Kuhlemann [2018]); here, adding to the range of viewpoints expressed, is another. We shall continue to hold that space open.

Respect for nature demands sharing landscapes and resources fairly with other species, which cannot be achieved without limiting human populations. So ecological citizens, the authors argue, should support measures to decrease fertility rates and limit immigration, both of which are necessary to reduce currently excessive populations. Global population growth will only end when enough individual nations embrace their own populations' peak and decline; hence, setting immigration levels that allow for national population contraction is needed. While migration at low levels may be sustainable, high immigration undermines both national and global population stabilization and does not solve the problems which drive emigration. Combined with reduced *per capita* consumption, smaller populations will help developed nations to quit hogging a disproportionate share of the global ecological commons, decrease greenhouse gas emissions and open up new opportunities for ecological restoration and rewilding.

Ecological citizens, like environmentalists generally, are conflicted about immigration. Some argue that in a crowded world, creating genuinely sustainable societies demands immigration limits and that overpopulated countries with growing populations, such as the UK and the USA, should reduce current immigration levels (e.g. Hines, 2018). Others feel that discussing immigration undermines consensus on the more important issue of limiting global population growth – and that, in any case, resource-hogging, imperialist powers like the UK and US have no moral right to limit immigration (e.g. Crist, 2019). While sympathetic to the concerns motivating the latter view, we strongly agree with the former, for reasons that are best clarified by considering the meaning of ecological citizenship.

At the level of first principles, ecological citizens recognize intrinsic value in the non-human world, and an ethical duty to share Earth's lands and seas fairly with other species (Washington *et al.*, 2018).

What this should mean in practice, in different parts of the world, is a matter for debate and democratic decision-making. But at a minimum it means preserving robust populations of all remaining native species, rather than continuing to displace and extinguish them. Given this goal, ecological citizenship is centrally concerned to limit human demands on non-human nature – not grudgingly, but gladly, as a necessary part of affirming our desire to live in community with other species. And because human numbers are a fundamental determinant of our demands and impacts on the natural world, ecological citizens should seek to limit the size of human populations. No matter which impacts we focus on (carbon emissions, water withdrawals from rivers, conversion of wildlands to crop lands, etc.) human societies that are always adding more people cannot limit their demands so as to fairly share the world's limited habitats and resources with other species.

This much all would-be ecological citizens seem to agree upon. Indeed,

**Philip Cafaro  
and Jane  
O'Sullivan**

## About the authors

Philip is Professor of Philosophy at the School of Global Environmental Sustainability, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO, USA. Jane is Honorary Senior Research Fellow at the School of Agriculture and Food Sciences, University of Queensland, St Lucia, QLD, Australia.

## Citation

Cafaro P and O'Sullivan J (2019) How should ecological citizens think about immigration? *The Ecological Citizen* 3: 85–92.

## Keywords

Limits; overpopulation; rewilding

“We should work to decrease population size only through morally acceptable means; and not as a panacea, but as part of a comprehensive environmentalism.”

Patrick Curry (2017) writes in the first issue of this journal that given the parlous and rapidly deteriorating state of global biodiversity, ecological citizens should support substantially shrinking current human populations. The logical path to this conclusion seems straightforward: a non-anthropocentric value system entails a commitment to sharing landscapes and resources fairly with other species, which in turn entails a commitment to decrease unsustainably large human populations. The conclusion itself seems justified, given two caveats: we should work to decrease population size only through morally acceptable means; and not as a panacea, but as part of a comprehensive environmentalism.

### Immigration as an environmental issue

At the national level, this justifies non-coercive measures to decrease fertility rates, such as widespread provision of affordable contraception, educating people about the economic and environmental benefits of small families, improving gender equity and prohibiting child marriage. But by the same token, it seems to justify limiting immigration, since the demographic consequences of high immigration levels

can be equally consequential, and can readily overwhelm the benefits of lower fertility rates. Consider the UK, whose population stood at 65.4 million in 2016 and which averaged about 230,000 annual net immigration between 1998 and 2017.

Continuing the status quo, the UK’s population is set to increase by over 15 million people (or 24%) during this century. Immigration plays the leading role in this increase, since fertility, at 1.79 children per woman, is significantly below replacement rate. Most of this projected increase disappears when net migration levels are halved; and when net migration is set at zero, the population decreases gradually (18% over 83 years). Conversely, doubling annual net migration leads to a 68% population increase by 2100 (see Figure 1).

It is harder to model the consequences of an ‘open borders’ immigration policy, but recent history indicates a huge pent-up demand among immigrant sender countries. The most recent Gallup poll estimated that more than 750 million people around the world would migrate if they could (Esipova *et al.*, 2018), while Sachs (in Sierakowski [2017]) suggests that, with complete freedom of movement, a billion people might move within five years,

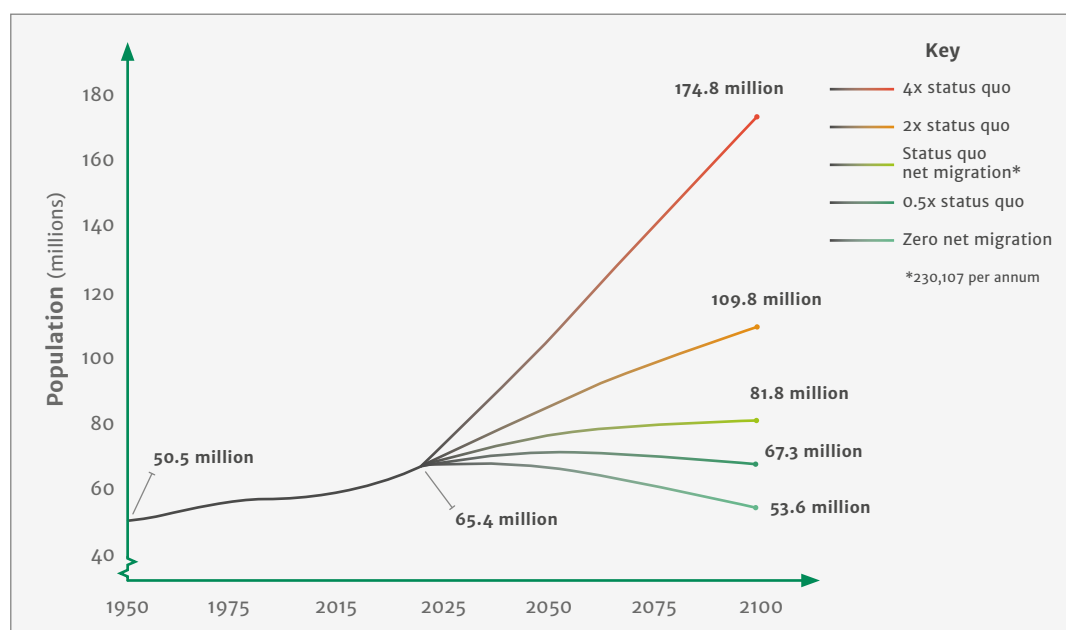


Figure 1. Projections for the UK to 2100 at five different immigration levels, assuming current fertility persists. Data and methodology in Cafaro and Dérer (2018).

doubling or tripling the populations of many developed countries. Let four times current annual net migration levels stand in as a very conservative proxy for open borders; at this level, the UK's population would increase by 167% by 2100.

How should an ecological citizen who is also a citizen of the UK respond to these facts? At a minimum, she should acknowledge their implications for efforts to create an ecologically sustainable society. Even on the basis of the Global Footprint Network's purely anthropocentric analysis, the current UK population is already using three times the nation's biocapacity. Without attempting to anticipate how future technologies might rein in that overshoot, it is obvious that a UK of 54 million people will have more options for sharing the landscape generously with other species than a UK of 81 million, much less one of 175 million. Similarly, a less overpopulated UK will be able to reduce greenhouse gas emissions more sharply and in other ways do more to meet its global ecological responsibilities. As David Attenborough has said, "I've never seen a [n environmental] problem that wouldn't be easier to solve with fewer people, or harder, and ultimately impossible, with more" (BBC, 2009).

One of the more hopeful signs of movement towards peaceful co-existence between people and nature is an increase in rewilding projects: efforts to regenerate forests, grasslands and wetlands and restore the species and ecosystem processes that existed prior to human development. Such efforts are particularly important in long-settled, densely populated countries with little pristine land left to preserve. In these places a more generous division of resources between humans and other species depends on giving back some of what we have taken. The organization Rewilding Europe explicitly acknowledges the positive role that population decrease plays in rewilding ([www.rewildingeurope.com](http://www.rewildingeurope.com)). From western Iberia to the Danube delta, most of their projects include ecological restoration of abandoned agricultural lands. Continued population reductions could contribute even more to such successes in the future,

allowing European nations to meet or even exceed the targets for protected areas set under the UN's Biodiversity Convention and endorsed by the EU (European Commission, 2010).

Thankfully, Europe's population trends are heading in the right direction to facilitate these efforts. At current fertility and immigration levels, the EU's population is poised to decrease by 52.6 million people (about 10%) during the rest of this century. But again, future immigration policy can accelerate or counteract this trend, as shown in [Figure 2](#).

Many factors are involved in rural land abandonment and urban sprawl, and it would be a mistake to assume a simple 1:1 correspondence between human numbers and habitat availability for other species. But it is a worse mistake to assume no relationship at all. Experience shows that decreasing human numbers opens up possibilities to ratchet back impacts and share the land more generously with other species (Navarro, 2014), while increasing our numbers tends to foreclose such possibilities. McKee (2003) found that the human population density of continental countries explained 88% of the variation in the proportion of their bird and mammal species threatened with extinction. Based on such considerations, we hold that ecological citizens should support lowering immigration wherever current levels prevent population decline (O'Sullivan, 2014; Cafaro, 2015).

### Think globally, act nationally

Ecologically minded citizens are predisposed to 'think globally', but it is not self-serving protectionism to prioritize the species and ecosystems within our own countries. This is where we have most influence, through our practical activities and political advocacy. It is also where we have our primary responsibilities as citizens. Respect for the autonomy of other nations requires us to concede that our influence over their environments is limited. However passionately non-Africans may desire to preserve African wildlife, for example, Africans and their governments will largely

---

“One of the more hopeful signs of movement toward peaceful co-existence between people and nature is an increase in rewilding projects.”

---

“A wise and just nation will strive to enact measures to ensure ecological justice between species and a fair distribution of wealth among its citizens. Neither of these goals are possible while opening up national residency to unlimited numbers of people.”

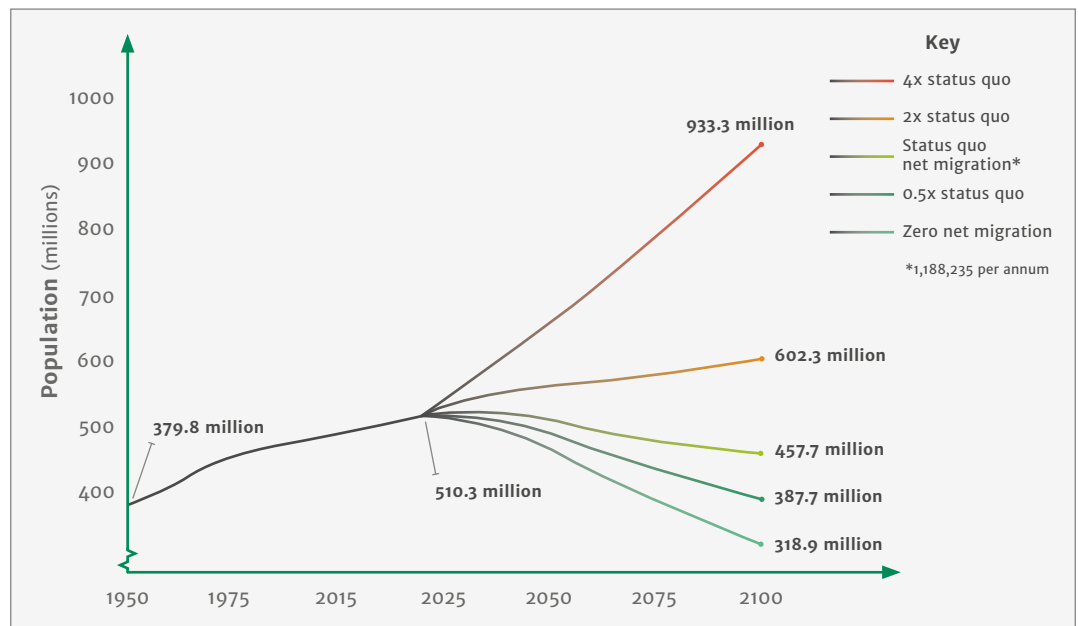


Figure 2. Projections for the EU to 2100 at five different immigration levels, assuming current fertility persists. Data and methodology in Cafaro and Dérer (2018).

determine their fate. The rest of the global community can and should offer advice and material support for preservation efforts. We should do all we can to limit climate change and protect the global ecosystems that wildlife everywhere depends upon. We should oppose destructive influences of transnational investors, whether corporate or state actors. But in the end, the degree to which Africans manage to live justly and sustainably with one another and with their wild neighbours will mostly be up to them. Ditto for Europeans, Asians, Americans and Antipodeans.

Many national boundaries bear the legacy of historical iniquities, casting a long shadow on modern injustices of ethnic subjugation and cross-border resource access. But nation-states are also the primary framework for democratic citizenship, through which civil society can influence policy and legislation (Tamir, 2019). We agree with Daly (2015) that a federation of interdependent nations (essentially the UN model) is preferable to unregulated corporate feudalism in a global commons – the likely result of dissolving borders. In any event, this is the framework we have, for the foreseeable future. If ecological citizenship is to have practical meaning in our generation, if we

hope to advance a progressive ecological agenda, it will be within this framework.

That citizens have a moral right to limit immigration into their countries, as a necessary corollary of the fundamental right of self-government, has been well argued elsewhere (Walzer, 1983; Rawls, 2001; Phillips, 2018). We believe that in many cases it is also their ethical responsibility to do so (Miller, 2016). A wise and just nation will strive to enact measures to ensure ecological justice between species and a fair distribution of wealth among its citizens. Neither of these goals are possible while opening up national residency to unlimited numbers of people (Cafaro, 2015).

The best way to influence global trends is by setting a good example. The ‘do as I say but not as I do’ approach is rightly treated with disdain. Ecological citizens in Europe should be glad that it has become the first continent to break the back of the population explosion (United Nations, 2017). They should firmly reject efforts to stir fears about their ‘ageing populations’, which are an achievement, not a problem (Götmark *et al.*, 2018), and work to put the right policies in place to realize the ecological benefits that shrinking populations can provide. Any nation that embraces its population peak and decline,

and celebrates the environmental benefits, strengthens the will of others to follow suit. Conversely, any nation that actively works to prolong its own population growth undermines population stabilization efforts elsewhere. Already, the strident alarmism from developed countries about population ageing has led some developing countries to fear a too-rapid fertility decline, and to see their youthful, growing populations as a boon (O'Sullivan and Martin, 2016). To take just one example, Tanzania's President Magufuli recently denounced contraception, saying "I have travelled to Europe and elsewhere and have seen the harmful effects of birth control. Some countries are now facing declining population" (BBC, 2018). Tanzania, with fertility over 5 children per woman, is on track to increase its population from 57 million in 2017 to 278 million by 2100 (United Nations, 2017).

### Strange and dangerous bedfellows

We recognize that immigration policies in the past have often been racially discriminatory (Dummett, 2001). Such racism is abhorrent. But we reject entirely the claim that *all* calls for immigration restriction are racist, or foster racism. This irrational guilt-by-association is a form of *argumentum ad Hitlerum*, which argues that anything Hitler favoured (such as vegetarianism, neoclassical art or organic gardening) is thereby 'fascist'. The ecological arguments for restricting immigration have nothing to do with race or ethnic identity, and reducing immigration is not the same as ending it. Should ecological citizens bury our own agenda for fear of an association that exists only in the eyes of our accusers? That seems self-defeating, given that fairness towards other species cannot be achieved without population stabilization.

In any case, there are strange bedfellows whichever direction we turn on immigration. Global financial elites have been instrumental in opening borders to the freer flow of cheap labour, along with predatory capital. When asked in a 2015 interview whether a committed socialist

should support open borders, Bernie Sanders shocked his interviewer by retorting that it was "a Koch brothers proposal" (Klein, 2015). Nagle (2018), in arguing 'the Left case against open borders', refers to liberal immigration advocates as "useful idiots of big business" – fundamentally at odds with the goals of the labour movement, which has traditionally opposed mass immigration, while achieving significant gains for workers globally through international solidarity.. She even cites Karl Marx on the futility of advancing the condition of English workers, without stemming the inflow of Irish labourers through Irish emancipation. Marx also explicitly called out capitalists' deliberate tactic of 'divide and rule', undermining social cohesion by fostering ethnic antagonism, to distract and weaken citizens' collective voice (Marx, 1870; Wilson, 2017). Ecological as well as social advances are casualties of dissipated and co-opted democracies.

So, on the one hand, if we advocate tighter immigration controls, we risk being slanderously associated with racists and ethnic chauvinists. But, on the other hand, if we advocate for higher immigration levels, or remain silent on the issue, we provide material support for an exploitative corporate globalism that undermines both workers' rights and environmental protection. Are ecological citizens not courageous enough to stand up to a bit of slander?

### Increased migration cannot rescue high-fertility countries from overpopulation

What of the people who would not be able to emigrate, under tighter immigration restrictions? They are at most a tiny fraction of the needy people in the developing world whose living standards we would wish to elevate. Of all the people alive who were born in developing countries, only around 3% have been able to emigrate elsewhere. Many of these have been relatively privileged, better-educated people whose skills are much needed in their own countries. Developing nations can ill afford to train doctors and nurses who leave for

---

“Any nation that embraces its population peak and decline, and celebrates the environmental benefits, strengthens the will of others to follow suit.”

---

better paying jobs in wealthier countries. According to Tulenko (2010), “there are more Ethiopian physicians practicing in Chicago today than in all of Ethiopia, a country of 80 million.” Well-meaning citizens in the developed world should push for increased foreign aid, better targeted for ecologically sustainable development. We should aim to alleviate the often-traumatic necessity for people to leave their homes – without undermining receiving nations’ own efforts to achieve ecological sustainability, or sacrificing other species’ very existence (Mathews, 2016).

As the populations of sender countries balloon, even a continued 3% emigration rate could overwhelm receiver countries’ capacity to absorb emigrants sustainably. From less than half Europe’s population in 1950, Africa is on track to be three times Europe’s population by 2050; if current trends continue, then in 2100 there may be seven Africans for each European (Figure 3).

Clearly the removal of a relative handful of their more able citizens will not ease the social and environmental strains such population increases will cause in Africa, or other swiftly growing areas. What these countries need is rapid fertility decline. Indeed, in Africa this is essential if recent development gains are not to be reversed and serious calamity is to be avoided (Population Institute, 2015; Shute and Nuki,

2018). Yet high-immigration arguments directly undermine efforts toward fertility reduction, by claiming that population growth is positive, and that we are more at risk of running out of workers than running out of fertile soil, fresh water, pollinators and unpolluted places. This myth is both product and perpetuator of the taboo on discussing overpopulation, cultivated throughout the 1980s and 1990s (Campbell, 2007), under the false claim that to do so is to advocate draconian one-child policies and forced sterilizations. The taboo should be overturned; it has shrunk political will and funding for national family planning programmes, holding back women’s right to birth control and causing fertility declines to stall in Africa and elsewhere (Bongaarts, 2008; Ezeh *et al.*, 2009). Within 20 years, this change caused the UN to double its projection for Africa’s population in 2100, from 2 to 4 billion. Renewed support for voluntary family planning could yet take at least a billion off that total (Ezeh, 2018), a goal that all thinking citizens, African or European, anthropocentric or ecocentric, have good reasons to endorse.

### Conclusion

The developed world is already overpopulated (Kuhlemann, 2018). Global population growth will only end when enough individual nations embrace their

“We should aim to alleviate the often-traumatic necessity for people to leave their homes – without undermining receiving nations’ own efforts to achieve ecological sustainability, or sacrificing other species’ very existence.”

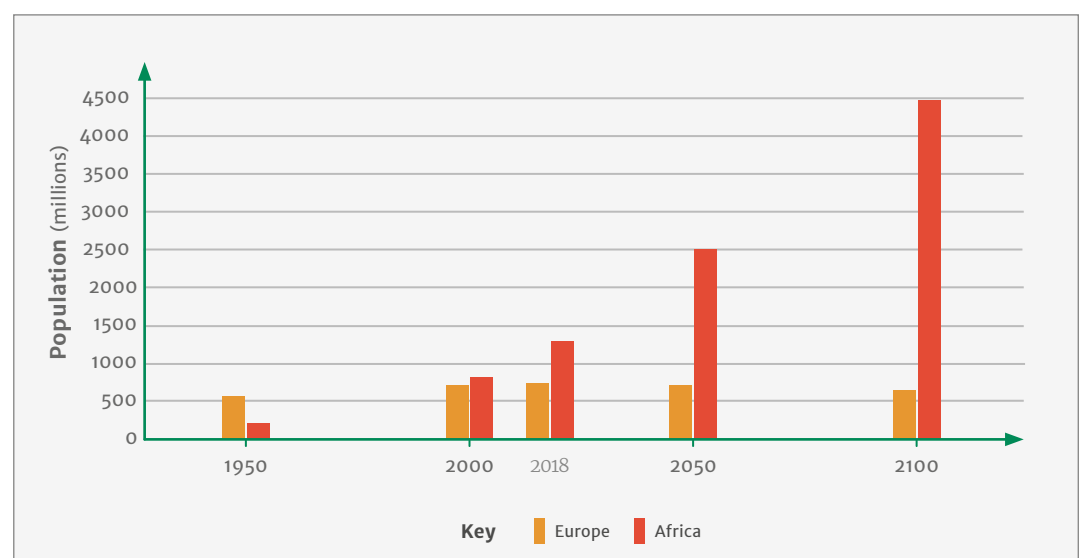


Figure 3. Historical and projected populations of Europe and Africa, 1950–2100, according to the United Nations (2017) medium variant projection.

own populations' peak and decline. For these reasons, net immigration should be set at levels that allow for population contraction. This is necessary if we hope to create ecologically sustainable societies that share resources fairly with other species. Combined with reduced *per capita* consumption, smaller populations will also help developed nations to quit hogging a disproportionate share of the global ecological commons.

Sustainability on our overcrowded planet is a wicked problem, requiring trade-offs and compromises. Ecological citizens distinguish ourselves by our demand that other species' interests be considered and by our unwillingness to trade away their very existences. By elevating the interests of non-human nature, ecological citizens risk being labelled anti-human – of 'caring more about animals than people'. The charge is baseless. We care about both. A crowded, biologically impoverished future is not a good human future. People consistently winning out over other species will, in the end, be a great loss for people. But, faced with the immediate personal hardships of would-be migrants, it takes resolve to remember that nature's limits are non-negotiable.

It is ecological citizens' duty to help our nations craft immigration policies that are racially non-discriminatory, economically equitable and fair to other species and future generations. Not talking about immigration will not make the issue go away. Immigration policy will still be made, perhaps on the basis of xenophobic views or capitalists looking for cheap labour. It would be a shame if ecological citizens abstained from these debates, thereby leaving future national population numbers to the whims of those with no interest in environmental impacts. Effectively, this would be to say: 'We can address 1001 effects of population growth – but not population growth itself.' Such an approach is obviously self-defeating, in terms of the many environmental goals pursued by ecological citizens. It also represents a missed opportunity to discuss the fundamental goals of our societies with our fellow citizens, and the need to respect

ecological limits. These are precisely the kinds of discussions we need to be having. ■

## References

- BBC (2009) Attenborough warns on population. *BBC News*, 13 April. Available at <https://is.gd/7cyMWg> (accessed April 2019).
- BBC (2018) Tanzania's President Magufuli calls for end to birth control. *BBC News*, 10 September. Available at <https://is.gd/GrpKxO> (accessed April 2019).
- Bongaarts J (2008) Fertility transitions in developing countries: Progress or stagnation? *Studies in Family Planning* **39**: 105–10.
- Cafaro P (2015) *How Many Is Too Many? The progressive argument for reducing immigration into the United States*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, IL, USA.
- Cafaro P and Dérer P (2018) *New policy-based population projections for the European Union, with a consideration of their environmental implications* (working paper). The Overpopulation Project, Gothenburg, Sweden. Available at <https://is.gd/K6CiY8> (accessed April 2019).
- Campbell M (2007) Why the silence on population? *Population & Environment* **28**: 237–46.
- Crist E (2019) Decoupling the global population problem from immigration issues. *The Ecological Citizen* **2**: 149–50.
- Curry P (2017) *The Ecological Citizen: An impulse of life, for life*. *The Ecological Citizen* **1**: 5–9.
- Daly H (2015) Mass migration and border policy. *Real-World Economics Review* **73**: 130–3.
- Dummett M (2001) *On Immigration and Refugees*. Routledge, London, UK.
- European Commission (2010) *Our Life Insurance, Our Natural Capital: EU biodiversity strategy to 2020*. European Environment Agency, Copenhagen, Denmark. Available at <https://is.gd/ohod84> (accessed April 2019).
- Esipova N, Pugliese A and Ray J (2018) More than 750 million worldwide would migrate if they could. *Gallup World News*, 10 December. Available at <https://is.gd/7sZfx8> (accessed April 2019).
- Ezeh A, Mberu B and Emina J (2009) Stall in fertility decline in Eastern African countries: Regional analysis of patterns, determinants and implications. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B* **364**: 2991–3007.
- Ezeh A (2018) Empowering women lies at the centre of controlling population growth in Africa. *The Conversation*, 20 September. Available at <https://is.gd/taiqY3> (accessed April 2019).
- Götmark F, Cafaro P and O'Sullivan J (2018) Aging human populations: Good for us, good for the Earth. *Trends in Ecology and Evolution* **33**: 851–62.
- Hines C (2018) Immigration and population: The interlinked ecological crisis that dares not speak its name. *The Ecological Citizen* **2**: 51–5.

“Combined with reduced *per capita* consumption, smaller populations will also help developed nations to quit hogging a disproportionate share of the global ecological commons.”

- Klein E (2015) Interview with Bernie Sanders. *Vox*, 28 July. Available at <https://is.gd/E3gMS7> (accessed April 2019).
- Kuhlemann K (2018) 'Any size population will do?': The fallacy of aiming for stabilization of human numbers. *The Ecological Citizen* **1**: 181–9.
- Marx K (1870) Letter to Sigfrid Meyer and August Vogt, 9 April. Available at <https://is.gd/q6oZmw> (accessed April 2019).
- Mathews F (2016) From biodiversity-based conservation to an ethic of bio-proportionality. *Biological Conservation* **200**: 140–8.
- McKee JK (2003) *Sparing Nature: The conflict between human population growth and Earth's biodiversity*. Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ, USA.
- Miller D (2016) *Strangers in Our Midst: The political philosophy of immigration*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, USA.
- Nagle A (2018) The Left case against open borders. *American Affairs* **2**. Available at <https://is.gd/DfG8MP> (accessed April 2019).
- Navarro L (2014) *Rewilding Abandoned Landscapes in Europe: Biodiversity impact and contribution to human well-being* (PhD thesis). University of Lisbon, Portugal.
- O'Sullivan J (2014) Ageing paranoia, its fictional basis and all too real costs. In: Goldie J and Betts K, eds. *Sustainable Futures: Linking population, resources and the environment*. CSIRO Publishing, Melbourne, Australia: 47–60.
- O'Sullivan J and Martin R (2016) The risk of misrepresenting the demographic dividend. *N-IUSSP*, 18 April. Available at <https://is.gd/wUovIK> (accessed April 2019).
- Phillips A (2018) *Immigration Ethics: Creating flourishing, just, and sustainable societies in a world of limits* (Master's thesis). Colorado State University, Fort Collins, CO, USA.
- Population Institute (2015) *Demographic Vulnerability: Where population growth poses the greatest challenges*. Washington, DC, USA.
- Rawls J (2001) *The Law of Peoples*. Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, USA.
- Sierakowski S (2017). Navigating the new abnormal: Interview with Jeffery Sachs. *Project Syndicate*, 3 February. Available at <https://is.gd/aupsHD> (accessed April 2019).
- Shute J and Nuki P (2018) Gates warns of 'turning point' for Africa as population booms. *The Telegraph*, 18 September. Available at <https://is.gd/SAEiuV> (accessed April 2019).
- Tamir Y (2019) *Why Nationalism*. Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, USA.
- Tulenko K (2010) Countries without doctors? *Foreign Policy*, 11 June. Available at <https://is.gd/Sk5nVp> (accessed April 2019).
- United Nations (2017) *World Population Prospects*. UN Population Division, New York, NY, USA.
- Walzer M (1983) *Spheres of Justice: A defense of pluralism and equality*. Basic Books, New York, NY, USA.
- Washington H, Chapron G, Kopnina H et al. (2018) Foregrounding ecojustice in conservation. *Biological Conservation* **228**: 367–74.
- Wilson D (2017) Marx on immigration: Workers, wages, and legal status. *Monthly Review*, 1 February. Available at <https://is.gd/4YNGRw> (accessed April 2019).

Never miss an issue of *The Ecological Citizen*

Sign up for content alerts at: [www.ecologicalcitizen.net/#signup](http://www.ecologicalcitizen.net/#signup)

Show your support for ecocentrism by signing the Statement of Commitment to Ecocentrism

Read and sign it here: <http://is.gd/ecocentrism>