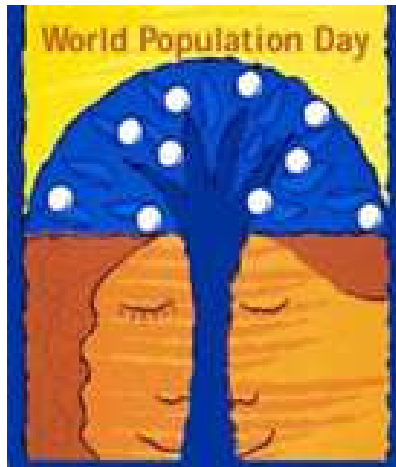


WORLD POPULATION DAY – 11TH JULY



On this day, the UN marks the anniversary of the day in 1987, when the world's population exceeded 5 billion. This is a day to think about population related issues in an ever more crowded world. The Day seeks to focus attention on the urgency and importance of global population, particularly in the context of overall development plans and programs, and the need to find solutions for these issues.

The population explosion: The rapid growth in global population is not a problem on its own. However, it will be a problem if we cannot find enough room for everyone. Will the population keep increasing or will it reach a stabilization point? What are the hidden problems of stabilization? How can environmental limitations influence the growth of global population?

What is the carrying capacity of our planet? Various authors have tried to answer this question, but there is no consensus on how many people we can accommodate. The long-term carrying capacity could be as low as two billion people, but for a limited period we might have as many as 12 billion. At the present time, the world's farmers are finding it more difficult to keep up with growth in population.

How fast is global population increasing? Over countless generations, global population was below 100 million. The annual increase was negligible and there was always enough room for everybody. The first sign that this near-stable situation was about to change occurred during the second millennium AD. By 1500 global population had reached about 500 million, and 200 years later it was 600 million. Then about 1800, it shot up to the 1000 million mark.

Even at these early stages of the growth of global population, this unusual increase was described as a population explosion. Little did we know then how accurate this description was. The explosion was confirmed about 1930 when we reached the second billion. From that time, global population increased at a breathtaking rate to reach the six billion mark at the end of 1999.

When presented in graphic form, global population shows a dramatic and rapid change from an almost horizontal line to an almost vertical one. As of 6 July 2009, the Earth's population is estimated by the United States Census Bureau to be 6.769 billion.

Increased population and the impact on our environment: “As soils are depleted, human health, vitality and intelligence go with them” (Louis Bromfield, US author, 1926 Pulitzer Prize winner). The land area of the planet supports almost all our consumption. We boost food production by overuse of agricultural chemicals, but what effects do they have on the land, on our health, and on the environment? How much forest area are we losing each year? Human expansion is routinely carried out with no regard for other species. How many are threatened with extinction and how will that affect humans? Economic progress is measured by production, but at what environmental price?

The destruction of the atmosphere: “Some recent occurrences such as the BSE disaster and even perhaps – dare I mention it – the present severe weather conditions in our country are, I have no doubt, the consequences of mankind’s arrogant disregard of the delicate balance of nature”. (Prince Charles, London, November 2000). We know that greenhouse gases have the capacity to create a warm blanket around the Earth. We know that the emission of these gases is increasing, yet we put off decisive action. Humans are endowed with enormous privilege, but also carry a huge burden of responsibility. We have power, knowledge, and technology, and through our ‘arrogant disregard of the delicate balance of nature’ we can destroy the environment.

Common misconceptions about the growth of global population: One misconception, is that global population increases slowly and steadily. The growth of global population is characterized by explosive behaviour, which means that we have no time to be complacent about it. Another misconception is that dramatic events such as world wars or large-scale outbreaks of disease have had an influence on population growth. However, when we examine historical data for global population we can see that they follow closely a smooth mathematical curve. Any small, temporary, and local deviations, which may have been caused by such dramatic events, did not have the slightest effect on the overall trend of the growth in global population. The third misconception is that better health care is responsible for a more rapid increase, but this hypothesis does not agree with recorded data. The main thrust of the population explosion takes place in poor countries where health care is also poor. It does not take place in rich countries where health care is good.

From a local perspective, Australia, despite its relative geographical isolation, is not immune to the impacts of population growth through an increase in the birth rate and the immigration rates over the past two decades. With our limited amount of arable land, dwindling water supply and the increasing rise of sea levels, the realistic carrying capacity of our country has yet to be assessed. In order to avoid irreversible loss of our remaining natural areas and the ecosystem services through human use and occupation, this is a question that requires the most urgent attention from all Australians.

Australia’s population increased by 1.9% for the year ending December 2008 according to statistics released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics today. The last time Australia saw higher growth rates (above 2%) was in the 1950’s and 1960’s as a result of post war migration and high birth rates. As at 31 December 2008, Australia’s population had grown to 21,644,000, an increase of 406,100 people over the previous year. (Written by Australian Bureau of Statistics, Monday 08 June 2009). For population estimates at the regional level please see: Australian Demographic Statistics, December Quarter 2008 (cat. no.3101.0).

Sources: “The Little Green Handbook: A Guide to Critical Global Trends”, 363.7 NIE; “State of the World 1990: A Worldwatch Institute Report on Progress Toward a Sustainable Society”, 330.9 STA; now available in Gecko library, & Sustainable Population Australia (SPA), www.population.org./index.php/the-news