

Overpopulation — The Argument Against

Not all analysts believe the Malthusian argument. Malthus wrote in 1793 that population growth would outstrip food resources in short order.ⁱ Since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, however, food production has outgrown population. Famine was less common in 1968, when Paul Erhlich echoed Malthus's dire predictions,ⁱⁱ than it was in 1793, and it is even less common now.

Some argue that overpopulation is an erroneous concept to begin with. They argue that scientific and technological progress will allow us to continually keep ahead of population growth. Julian Simon famously predicted that by the time we get there, the world will be capable of sustaining quadrillions of people—that's a million times as many as we have now.ⁱⁱⁱ This opinion is not widely respected, but less extreme versions of the argument are held.

Others argue that overpopulation is conceptually valid, but that demographic conversion will take care of the problem, and we needn't concern ourselves with it.^{iv} Given the power of demographic conversion to reduce birth rates, this position seems more reasonable than the argument that the world can sustain as many people as we put in it. However, even here, the majority disagree, and feel that this opinion can only be sustained by cherry-picking the data.

Still others do not concern themselves with the number of people the world can sustain, but rather focus on the potential negative effects of shrinking population. Throughout history, shrinking population has been accompanied by economic contraction and social dislocation. One doesn't know how applicable history is, however, as population reduction has never been undertaken voluntarily in a planned way. It has always been the result of famine (e.g. the Biafran famine of the 1960s), plague (e.g. the black death in the 14th century), by war (e.g. the 30 Years War in Germany), or by total collapse (as in Easter Island).

We don't know what planned population reduction would look like. Some argue, for instance, that shrinking population may lead to a shortage of workers. Reduced output would lead to economic contraction, and the hardship that entails. Or that demographic dynamics will lead to an aging population with fewer people of working age to support them, a problem many countries already face as they undergo demographic conversion.^v

Singapore initiated population control policies in the late 1950s. They propagandized the people to reduce family size, removed tax credits for more than 2 children, and gave preferential school admission to children from small families. The birth rate declined below the replacement rate, and the population began shrinking, just as desired. However, the country's leaders then reversed the policy, strongly rewarding 4 or more children, and population has begun growing again. Singapore does not appear to have suffered significant social or economic dislocation from population reduction, rather it appears to have reacted to xenophobic fears related to its position vis-à-vis Malaysia.^{vi}

The progress that keeps us ahead of the Malthusian disaster causes environmental degradation and cannot be indefinitely sustained. The Malthusian argument is most likely correct, although the timing and form of the eventual rise in death rates cannot be accurately predicted.

ⁱ Thomas Malthus wrote *An essay on the principle of population* in 1798. An 1826 edition can be viewed online at Google Books: <http://books.google.com/books?id=ngQAAAAAMAAJ&pg=RA1-PR19&dq=Thomas+Malthus+Essay+Principles+Population>.

ⁱⁱ Paul Ehrlich published *The population bomb* in which he made a number of very specific, very draconian, and very wrong predictions, in 1968.

ⁱⁱⁱ Simon, Julian. (1981). *The ultimate resource*. Princeton University Press. A second edition is available online at http://www.juliansimon.org/writings/Ultimate_Resource/.

^{iv} Lomborg, Bjorn. (2001). *The skeptical environmentalist*. London: Cambridge University Press. The publication of this book created an intense controversy that was quite hysterical on both sides. It is difficult to evaluate a scientific work in the midst of such a controversy: how does one distinguish the voices that support Lomborg's right to publish (Voltaire's "I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it") from those who agree with his position? I conclude that the large majority of population experts disagree with Lomborg and believe that he has improperly used the data. This does not necessarily make him wrong, but it increases the chances.

^v *Aging in Europe*. Wikipedia. Viewed online 10/2007. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aging_of_Europe.

^{vi} *Singapore population control policies*. Library of Congress. Viewed online 9/15/2007 at [http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field\(DOCID+sg0041\)](http://lcweb2.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/r?frd/cstdy:@field(DOCID+sg0041)).