

DEMOGRAPHY

Overpopulation Threatens World

The specter of overpopulation, brought on by medical achievements, is threatening the world. World population may double to 6,000,000,000 in 40 years.

By RALPH SEGMAN

➤ ONE OF MODERN MAN'S proudest achievements, the increase of the human life span, is threatening to explode in his face.

The danger lies in the so-called "Population Bomb." If the present explosive rate of population growth continues, the world will be overrun by multitudes of people kept healthy and alive by medical science. But it would be impossible for the most fertile earth to support such a human mass. Eventually, billions would die of starvation, succumb to disease because of lowered resistance, and kill one another off in wars.

Part of the blame for this enormous threat can be put on man's medical progress which, in the past century, has been no less than phenomenal. He has discovered cures and immunizations for most death-dealing diseases. He has developed ingenious surgical methods for bringing new life to the hopeless and the debilitated. He has brought the science of nutrition, with its mineral and vitamin supplements, to a level where good health is more of a normal occurrence than a goal to strive for.

Growth Statistics

All this has led to longer, healthier life and a far better material world than ever before. And for the next few decades life promises to improve even more.

Here is the hitch:

According to the United Nations Demographic (statistical study of populations) Yearbook for 1957, the world's annual average birth rate during the five previous years was 34 per 1,000 population. The death rate was 18. These are the seemingly innocuous figures that spell out the monstrous dilemma in which the human race finds itself.

Until 1650, world population grew slowly and erratically, held in check by epidemics, famines, droughts, wars and other disasters, until it reached about 500,000,000. In the ensuing three centuries it has more than quintupled to more than 2,800,000,000, and shows no definite signs of slowing down. The U.N. report indicates that by the year 2000, only 41 years from now, the face of the earth will be crowded with 6,250,000,000 human beings.

As population grows, material demands expand and competition among nations increases for the remaining natural resources. The complexities of life increase. Cities become larger, and farmland, forests and even deserts retreat before the onslaught of asphalt, concrete and steel.

Indeed, we may be on a suicidal course like lemmings which, some scientists theorize, reproduce so avidly that periodically they exhaust their food supply and leap to their deaths at sea in quest of new "pastures."

How is the coming human mass to be fed, let alone clothed? The Population Reference Bureau, a private research organization in Washington, D.C., estimates that in the next ten years about 500,000,000 additional acres of farmland will be needed, an area as large as Alaska, Colorado and Arizona.

The problem is approached from two directions. One is to provide the material demands through scientific advance. For example, in the U.S. one-third fewer farm people produced 55% more farm products in 1958 than in 1938. A hybrid corn, developed by former vice president Henry A. Wallace in the late 1930's, added 20% or 500,000,000 bushels to America's corn harvest without additional land or labor.

Future achievements of science and technology will constitute a partial solution but there is a limit to the amount of bread that can be squeezed out of the earth.

The second approach concerns the touchy subject of birth control, or man-made restrictions on the size of the increasing world population.

Responsibility for the specter of overpopulation is primarily that of man's growing control over nature and the declining death rate, coupled with his lack of control over his own nature and the steady birth rate.

Dr. Harrison S. Brown, professor of geochemistry at the California Institute of Technology and author of books on the population problem, believes solutions can be found that "do not violate human dignity and which can fit into the framework of individual culture patterns, moral codes and beliefs."

Urging us to cast aside our squeamishness, Dr. Brown suggests that two requisites for solving the problem are: first, to discuss it widely and understand it; and, second, to intensify biological and social research.

Some nations have achieved a degree of birth control, most notably Japan.

One of the most crowded countries in Asia, Japan has recorded what is believed to be the most spectacular birth rate decline in modern history: from 34.3 in 1947 to 18.5 in 1956. With 90,000,000 people jammed into an area smaller than that of California, the Japanese are intensely aware of the danger of overpopulation.



OVERPOPULATION—This alley scene in Miami, Fla., is one of today's scattered examples of the overpopulation disease threatening to spread throughout the world. As population grows, it is increasingly difficult to supply the people with adequate food, clothing and shelter.

Since World War II, contraceptives have come into more widespread use. In 1948, abortion and sterilization were legalized. These factors and a natural decrease in birth rate seem to be responsible for the amazing decline.

The position of the Catholic Church in the matter is summarized in a book "Overpopulation" published by The Catholic University of America Press. The summary includes the following points:

1. If human expansion continues indefinitely, the race eventually will become too large for its earthly habitat. With our present knowledge, we cannot understand how God intends to maintain a state of equilibrium.

2. It cannot be predicted accurately how population will develop in the future, how great the production potential is or what future possibilities remain to be uncovered.

3. When the increasing life expectancy, a transitory condition, levels off the death rate may be expected to rise and more nearly approximate the birth rate. Then population will take a downward swing.

4. It is irrational to take population restriction measures in order to avoid a catastrophe in the unforeseeable future which is only a matter of conjecture. Such measures have little scientific backing and betray a lack of faith in the Divine Providence.

Since there appears to be agreement that the earth is limited in the number of people it can support, there is at least some recognition of the problem. Such recognition must grow in all human beings from the present generations on. Only then may it be possible to forestall the impending disaster of a teeming over-populated earth.

Science News Letter, February 28, 1959

Questions

CARDIOLOGY—What is the red blood cell count of the giraffe? p. 133.

CLIMATOLOGY—What temperature trend has been confirmed from data obtained in Antarctica during the International Geophysical Year? p. 131.

VETERINARY MEDICINE—What is the feline equivalent of the common head cold in humans? p. 136.

Photographs: Cover, Perkin-Elmer Corp.; p. 131, McDonnell Aircraft Corp.; p. 133, New York Heart Association; p. 135, Minneapolis General Hospital Research Foundation, Inc.; p. 138, U. S. Public Housing Administration; p. 144, Eastman Chemical Products, Inc.

Do You Know

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