How Many People can the Earth Support?[1]

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ESTIMATES OF HUMAN CARRYING CAPACITY

On 25 April 1679, in Delft, Holland, the inventor of the microscope, Antoni van Leeuwenhoek, wrote down what may be the first estimate of the maximum number of people that the earth can support. If all the habitable land in the world had the same population density as Holland (at that time about 120 people for every square kilometer), he calculated that the earth could support at most 13.4 billion people – far fewer than the number of spermatozoans his lenses had revealed in the milt of a cod.

In subsequent centuries, van Leeuwenhoek's estimate has been followed by dozens of similar calculations. Around 1695, a Londoner named Gregory King estimated that the earth's 'land if fully peopled would sustain', at most, 12.5 billion people. In 1765, a German regimental pastor, Johann Peter Süssmilch, compared his own figure (13.9 billion) with the estimates of van Leeuwenhoek, the French military engineer, Sébastien le Prestre de Vauban (5.5 billion), and the English writer and cartographer Thomas Templeman (11.5 billion).

In recent decades, estimates of maximum population have appeared thicker and faster than ever before. Under the rubric of 'carrying capacity', they crop up routinely in environmental debates, in United Nations (UN) reports, and in papers by scholars or academic politicians trained in ecology, economics, sociology, geography, soil science, or agronomy, among other disciplines. Demographers, however, have been strangely silent. Of the more than 200 symposiums held at the 1992 and 1993 annual meetings of the Population Association of America, not one session dealt with estimating or defining human carrying capacity for any region of the earth. Instead, professional demographers tend to focus on the composition and growth of populations, restricting their predictions to the near term – generally a few decades into the future – and framing them in conditional terms: *If* rates of birth, death,

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and migration (by age, sex, location, marital status, and so on) are such-and-such, *then* population size and distribution will be so-and-so.

Such conditional predictions, or forecasts, can be powerful tools. Projections by the UN showed dramatically that *if* human populations continued to grow at 1990 rates in each major region of the world, *then* the population would increase more than 130-fold in 160 years, from about 5.3 billion in 1990 to about 694 billion in 2150. Those figures are extremely sensitive to the future level of average fertility. If, hypothetically, from 1990 onwards the average couple gradually approached a level of fertility just one-tenth of a child more than required to replace themselves, world population would grow from 5.3 billion in 1990 to 12.5 billion in 2050 and 20.8 billion in 2150. In contrast, if (again hypothetically) starting in 1990, and ever after, couples bore exactly the number of children needed to replace themselves, world population would grow from 5.3 billion in 1990 to 7.7 billion in 2050 and would level off around 8.4 billion by 2150.

The clear message is that people cannot forever continue to have, on average, more children than are required to replace themselves. That is not an ideological slogan; it is a hard fact. Conventional agriculture cannot grow enough food for 694 billion people; not enough water falls from the skies. The finiteness of the earth guarantees that ceilings on human numbers do exist.

Where are those ceilings? Some people believe that any limit to human numbers is so remote that its existence is irrelevant to present concerns. Others declare that the human population has already exceeded what the earth can support in the long run (how long is usually left unspecified). Still others concede that short-term limits may exist, but they argue that technologies, institutions, and values will adapt in unpredictable ways to push ceilings progressively higher so that they recede forever. The differences of opinion are buttressed by vast disparities in calculation. In the past century, experts of various stripes have made estimates of human carrying capacity ranging from less than a billion to more than 1000 billion. Who, if anyone, is right?

For several years, I have been trying to understand the question – How many people can the earth support? – and the answers to it. This question cannot be answered by a number or even by a range of numbers. The earth's capacity to support people is determined partly by processes that the social and natural sciences have yet to understand, and partly by choices that we and our descendants have yet to make.

NATURAL CONSTRAINTS AND HUMAN CHOICES

In most of its various scientific uses, *carrying capacity* refers to a population of wild animals within a particular ecosystem. One widely used ecology textbook defines it as follows

> *Number of individuals in a population that the resources of a habitat can support; the asymptote, or plateau, of the logistic and other sigmoid equations for population growth.*

Even within ecology, the concept of carrying capacity has important limitations. It applies best under stable conditions and over relatively short spans of time. In the real world, climates and habitats fluctuate and change; animals adapt to their conditions and eventually evolve into new species. With each change, the carrying capacity changes as well.

When applied to human beings, the concept becomes vastly more volatile. I have collected 26 definitions of human carrying capacity, all published since 1975. Most of them agree on a few basic points – for instance, that the concept refers to the number of people who can be supported for some period (usually not stated) in some mode of life considered plausible or desirable. Most of the definitions recognize that ecological concepts of carrying capacity must be extended to allow for the role of technology. Most also agree that culturally and individually variable standards of living, including standards of environmental quality, set limits on population size well before the physical requirements for sheer subsistence start to become an issue.

In other respects, however, the definitions vary widely or even contradict one another. How long must a population be sustainable? Does it make sense to speak of local or regional carrying capacity – or do trade and the need for inputs from outside any specified region imply that only a global scale will do? Or, a more fundamental question – how constraining are constraints? Some definitions deny the existence of any finite carrying capacity altogether, holding that human ingenuity will win out over any natural barriers; others acknowledge that the limits are real but recognize that human choices, now and in the future, will largely decide where those limits fall.

In my opinion, that last point – the interplay of natural constraints and human choices – is the key to making sense of human carrying capacity. The deceptively simple question – How many people can the earth support? – hides a host of thorny issues.

HOW MANY PEOPLE AT WHAT AVERAGE LEVEL OF MATERIAL WELL-BEING?

The human carrying capacity of the earth will obviously depend on the typical material level at which people choose to live. Material well-being includes food (people choose variety and palatability, beyond the constraints imposed by physiological requirements); fiber (people choose cotton, wool, or synthetic fibers for clothing, wood pulp or rag for paper); water (tap water or Perrier or the nearest river or mud hole for drinking, washing, cooking, and

watering your lawn, if you have one); housing (Auschwitz barracks: two men to a plank; or Thomas Jefferson's Monticello); manufactured goods; waste removal (for human, agricultural, and industrial wastes); natural hazard protection (against floods, storms, volcanoes, and earthquakes); health (prevention, cure, and care); and the entire range of amenities such as education, travel, social groups, solitude, the arts, religion, and communion with nature. Not all of those features are captured well by standard economic measures.

HOW MANY WITH WHAT DISTRIBUTION OF MATERIAL WELL-BEING?

An ecologist, an economist, and a statistician went bow hunting in the woods and spied a deer. The ecologist shot first, and his arrow landed five meters to the left of the deer. The economist shot next, and her arrow landed five meters to the right of the deer. The statistician looked at both arrows, looked at the deer, and jumped up and down shouting: 'We got it! We got it!'

Estimates of human carrying capacity rarely take into account the distribution of material well-being throughout a population. Yet, paying attention to average well-being while ignoring the distribution of well-being is like using an average arrow to kill a deer. People who live in extreme poverty may not know or care if the global average is satisfactory, and the press of present needs may keep them from taking a long-term view. For example, thanks to genetic engineering, any country with a few PhDs in molecular plant biology and a modestly equipped laboratory can insert the genes needed to create stronger, more disease-resistant, higher-yielding plants. If every region has the scientific and technical resources to improve its own crop plants, the earth can support more people than it can if some regions are too poor to help themselves.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WITH WHAT TECHNOLOGY?

The complexities of technological choices often disappear in heated exchanges between environmental pessimists and technological optimists. Ecologists argue that when a natural resource is being consumed faster than it is being replenished or recycled, an asset is being depleted, to the potential harm of future generations. However, technologists assert that if new knowledge and technology can produce an equivalent or superior alternative, then future generations may turn out to be better off. Taxpayers, in turn, tend to raise questions such as: which are the natural resources that can be replaced by technology yet to be invented, and which cannot? Will there be enough time to develop new technology and put it to work on the required scale? Could we avoid future problems, pain, and suffering by making other choices

now about technology or ways of living? Neither the ecologist nor the technologist has any answers to these questions.

The key to the argument is time. As Richard E Benedick, an officer of the US Department of State who has also served with the World Wide Fund for Nature, worried (Benedick 1991)

> *While it is true that technology has generally been able to come up with solutions to human dilemmas, there is no guarantee that ingenuity will always rise to the task. Policy makers must contend with a nagging thought: 'what if it does not, or what if it is too late?'*

HOW MANY PEOPLE WITH WHAT DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL POLITICAL INSTITUTIONS?

Political organization and effectiveness affect human carrying capacity. For example, the United Nations Development Program estimated that developing countries could mobilize, for development, as much as $50 billion a year (an amount comparable to all official development assistance), if they reduced military expenditures, privatized public enterprises, eliminated corruption, made development priorities economically more rational, and improved national governance. Conversely, population size, distribution, and composition affect political organization and effectiveness.

How will political institutions and civic participation evolve with increasing population? As numbers increase, what will happen to people's ability to participate effectively in the political system? What standards of personal liberty will people choose?

How will people bring about political change within existing nations? By elections and referendums, or by revolutions, insurrection, or civil war? How will people choose to settle differences between nations, for instance, over disputed borders, shared water resources, or common fisheries? Wars consume human and physical resources. Negotiations consume patience and often require compromise. The two options impose different constraints on human carrying capacity.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WITH WHAT DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC ARRANGEMENTS?

What levels of physical and human capital are assumed? Tractors, lathes, computers, better health, and better education – all these resources make workers in rich countries far more productive than those in poor countries. Wealthier workers are more productive and can support more people.

What regional and international trade in finished goods and mobility in productive assets are to be permitted or encouraged? How will work be organized? The invention of the factory organized production to minimize idleness in the use of labor, tools, and machines. What new ways of organizing work should be assumed to estimate the future human carrying capacity?

HOW MANY PEOPLE WITH WHAT DOMESTIC AND INTERNATIONAL DEMOGRAPHIC ARRANGEMENTS?

Almost every aspect of demography (birth, death, age structure, migration, marriage, and family structure) is subject to human choices that will influence the earth's human carrying capacity.

A stationary global population will have to choose between a long average length of life and a high birth rate. It must also choose between a single average birth rate for all regions (some areas have fertility above their replacement level, whereas other areas have fertility below their replacement level), on the one hand, and a demographic specialization of labor, on the other.

Patterns of marriage and household formation will also influence human carrying capacity. For example, the public resources that have to be devoted to the care of the young and the aged depend on the roles played by families. In China, national law requires families to care for and support their elderly members; in the US, elderly people often rely on their own resources and those of the state.

HOW MANY PEOPLE IN WHAT PHYSICAL, CHEMICAL, AND BIOLOGICAL ENVIRONMENTS?

What physical, chemical, and biological environments will people choose for themselves and for their children? Much of the heat in the public argument over current environmental problems arises because the consequences of present and projected choices and changes are uncertain. Will global warming cause great problems, or would a global limitation on fossil fuel consumption cause greater problems? Will toxic or nuclear wastes or ordinary sewage sludge dumped in the deep ocean come back to haunt future generations when deep currents well up in biologically productive offshore zones, or would the long-term effects of disposing of those wastes on land be worse? The choice of particular alternatives could materially affect human carrying capacity.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WITH WHAT VARIABILITY OR STABILITY?

How many people the earth can support depends also on how steadily you want the earth to support that population. If you are willing to let the human population rise and fall, depending on annual crops, decadal weather patterns, and long-term shifts in climate, the average population with ups and downs would include the peaks of population size, whereas the guaranteed level would have to be adjusted to the level of the lowest valley. Similar reasoning applies to variability or stability in the level of well-being; the quality of the physical, chemical, and biological environments; and various other dimensions of choice.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WITH WHAT RISK OR ROBUSTNESS?

How many people the earth can support depends on the desired controllability of the well-being of the population. One possible strategy would be to maximize numbers at some given level of well-being, ignoring the risk of natural or human disaster. Another would be to accept a smaller population size in return for increased control over random events. For example, if you settle in a previously uninhabited hazardous zone (such as the flood plains of the Mississippi River or the hurricane-prone coast of the southeastern US), you demand a higher carrying capacity of the hazardous zone; you must, however, accept a higher risk of catastrophe. When farmers do not give fields a fallow period, they extract a higher carrying capacity along with a higher risk that the soil will lose its fertility (as agronomists at the International Rice Research Institute in the Philippines discovered to their surprise).

HOW MANY PEOPLE FOR HOW LONG?

Human carrying capacity depends strongly on the time horizon that people choose for planning. The population that the earth can support at a given level of well-being for 20 years may differ substantially from the population that can be supported for 100 or 1000 years.

The time horizon is crucial in energy analysis. How fast oil stocks are being consumed matters little if one cares only about the next five years. In the long term, technology can change the definition of resources, converting what was useless rock to a valuable resource; hence, no one can say whether industrial society is sustainable for 500 years.

Some definitions of human carrying capacity refer to the size of a population that can be supported indefinitely. Such definitions are operationally meaningless. There is no way of knowing what human population size can be supported indefinitely (other than zero population, since the sun is expected to burn out in a few billion years, and the human species almost certainly will be extinct long before then). The concept of indefinite sustainability is a phantasm, a diversion from the difficult problems of today and the coming century.

HOW MANY PEOPLE WITH WHAT FASHIONS, TASTES, AND VALUES?

What people want from life also determines the number of people the earth can support. Many choices that appear to be economic depend heavily on individual and cultural values. Should industrial societies use the available supplies of fossil fuels in households for heating and for personal transportation, or outside of households to produce other goods and services? Do people prefer a high average wage and low employment or a low average wage and high employment (if they must choose)?

Should industrial economies now seek to develop renewable energy sources, or should they keep burning fossil fuels and leave the transition to future generations? Should women (and men) work outside their homes? Should economic analyses continue to discount future income and costs, or should they strive to even the balance between the people now living and their unborn descendants?

I am frequently asked whether organized religion, particularly Roman Catholicism, is a serious obstacle to the decline of fertility. Certainly, in some countries, church policies have hindered couples' access to contraception and have posed obstacles to family planning programs. In practice, however, factors other than religion seem to be decisive in setting average levels of fertility for Roman Catholics. In 1992, two Catholic countries, Spain and Italy, had the second- and third-lowest fertility rates in the world. In largely Catholic Latin America, fertility has been falling rapidly, with modern contraceptive methods playing a major role. In most of the US, the fertility of Catholics has gradually converged with that of Protestants, and polls show that nearly four-fifths of the Catholics think that couples should make up their own minds about family planning and abortion.

Even within the church hierarchy, Catholicism shelters a diversity of views. On 15 June 1994, the Italian Bishops' conference issued a report stating that falling mortality and improved medical care 'have made it unthinkable to sustain indefinitely a birthrate that notably exceeds the level of two children per couple'. Moreover, by promoting literacy for adults, education for children, and the survival of infants in developing countries, the church has helped bring about some of the social preconditions essential for fertility decline.

On the whole, the evidence seems, to me, to support the view of the ecologist William W Murdoch of the University of California, Santa Barbara (Murdoch 1991)

> *Religious beliefs have only small, although sometimes significant, effects on family size. Even these effects tend to disappear with rising levels of well-being and education.*

IMPROVING THE ART OF LIVING

In short, the question – How many people can the earth support? – has no single numerical answer, now or ever. Human choices about the earth's human carrying capacity are constrained by facts of nature and may have unpredictable consequences. Consequently, estimates of human carrying capacity cannot aspire to be more than conditional and probable: if future choices are thus-and-so, then the human carrying capacity is likely to be so-and-so. They cannot predict the constraints or possibilities that lie in the future; their true worth may lie in their role as a goad to conscience and a guide to action in the here and now.

The following beautiful quotation, by the English philosopher John Stuart Mill (Mill 1848) sketches the kind of shift in values such action might entail. When it was written in 1848, the world's population was less than one-fifth its present size.

> *There is room in the world, no doubt, and even in old countries, for a great increase of population, supposing the arts of life to go on improving, and capital to increase. But even if innocuous, I confess I see very little reason for desiring it. The density of population necessary to enable mankind to obtain, in the greatest degree, all the advantages both of cooperation and of social intercourse, has, in all the most populous countries, been obtained. A population may be too crowded, though all be amply supplied with food and raiment. It is not good for man to be kept perforce at all times in the presence of his species. A world from which solitude is extirpated, is a very poor ideal...Nor is there much satisfaction in contemplating the world with nothing left to the spontaneous activity of nature; with every rood of land brought into cultivation, which is capable of growing food for human beings; every flowery waste or natural pasture ploughed up, all quadrupeds or birds which are not domesticated for man's use exterminated as his rivals for food, every hedgerow or superfluous tree rooted out, and scarcely a place left where a wild shrub or flower could grow without being eradicated as a weed in the name of improved agriculture. If the earth must lose that great portion of its pleasantness which it owes to things that the unlimited increase of wealth and population would extirpate from it, for the mere purpose of enabling it to support a larger but not a better or a happier population, I sincerely hope, for the sake of posterity, that they will content to be stationary, long before necessity compels them to it.*
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> *It is scarcely necessary to remark that a stationary condition of capital and population implies no stationary state of human improvement. There would be as much scope as ever for all kinds of mental culture,*

and moral and social progress; as much room for improving the Art of Living, and much more likelihood of its being improved, when minds ceased to be engrossed by the art of getting on. Even the industrial arts might be as earnestly and as successfully cultivated, with this sole difference, that instead of serving no purpose but the increase of wealth, industrial improvements would produce their legitimate effect, that of abridging labor...Only when, in addition to just institutions, the increase of mankind shall be under the deliberate guidance of judicious foresight, can the conquests made from the powers of nature by the intellect and energy of scientific discoverers, become the common property of the species, and the means of improving it and elevating the universal lot.

NOTE

 This article is adapted from the author's book *How Many People Can the Earth Support?* published in 1995 by W W Norton & Company, and is excerpted with the kind permission of the publishers. This article first appeared in the November/December issue of *The Sciences* (New York Academy of Sciences) and is reprinted (in a slightly modified form) with permission.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author acknowledges the support of the US National Science Foundation (Grant BSR92-07293) and the hospitality of Mr and Mrs William T Golden.

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POPULATION, ENVIRONMENT, AND DEVELOPMENT

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