

## TELLING AND SELLING THE OVERPOPULATION ISSUE: WHY CLIMATE CHANGE GETS SO MUCH MORE ATTENTION

### An NPG Forum Paper

by Dr. Karen I. Shragg

#### Abstract

Search the literature; read the news; comb the mission statements and recommendations of various environmental non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and it will become obvious how climate change dominates the public discourse leaving the overpopulation issue behind. The average global per person carbon footprint is 4.9 metric tons per year according to the Global Footprint Network. Multiplied by 82 million, which is the number World Population Balance says we add (net gain) to our planet every year, and one gets a low estimate of almost 402 million metric tons of carbon added to the planet. These numbers indicate that the per person impact matters when it comes to climate change. Numbers matter when it comes to resource and wildlife and general quality of life as well, but for the purpose of this paper I will explore why these two very connected issues have been separated to the detriment of us all.

#### The Hurdles Before Us

Why is the story of overpopulation so hard to tell and sell? Why has the climate change story been so much more successful in becoming a dominant – if not the dominant – environmental issue of demonstrators, major media and NGO's? Why are there so many guilty parties in the deliberate and collective silence on this issue? From mainstream to alternative media, from environmental NGO's to political candidates, from meteorologists to immigration and peace activists, overpopulation remains a decades-long taboo.

Both issues paint such a horrific future for humankind and wildlife, yet only one is truly on the table. The very existence of human-caused climate change is still controversial to some, but at least it is being discussed. A quick Google search of NGO's addressing climate change produces a lengthy list, a longer one than a similar search for overpopulation groups. My favorite is called Climate Reality. It is Al Gore's pet project and it is not truly teaching the reality of climate change because you will not find any reference to the overpopulation issue on its plea for a reduction in the use of fossil fuels.

What I want to examine in this forum paper is why climate change gets almost all of the ink devoted to big issues threatening the planet while

overpopulation remains an issue which is largely ignored. Why do overpopulation groups discuss climate change but climate change groups largely ignore overpopulation? One would be hard pressed to find even one reference to overpopulation on 350.org, or other listed climate websites. There is a different story on overpopulation websites. The World Population Balance website, [www.worldpopulationbalance.org](http://www.worldpopulationbalance.org), helps viewers make the critical connection between the two. They say: "Adaptation to climate disruption will be much easier with a much smaller global population."

I do not want to contribute to any conversation about which issue is more important. Competition between these two critical issues is not productive. They are intimately and inextricably connected and both important. Ideally every paper, NGO, activist and journalist would never speak of one without discussing the other. I want to explore why this is not happening in our divided world.

At first blush, climate change is just easier to discuss. It comes with less baggage. In my own life I recall holding a forum for 125 people at my nature center on what was then called Global Warming. I had a state senator come in to discuss what government could do about it. That was in 1988. It took me another four years to realize that there

was more to the story of human- caused planetary destruction. What I came to understand is that if climate change were to magically disappear as a threat to life on earth, overpopulation would remain as an existential threat to our existence. Because we live on a limited planet with a fragile biosphere, we would continue to suffer from scarcity and the issues that it perpetuates: poverty, lack of fresh water, war, traffic, and loss of species. Furthermore, each of us cannot help but contribute to our carbon footprint with our diet, use of water, energy and need for shelter as well as transportation and other products. One million people are added to our already overpopulated planet every 4.5 days. If climate change is the fire, overpopulation is the fuel.

Economists carry a lot of weight in our culture yet their over-arching perspective is damaging to both the issues of climate change and overpopulation.

According to Dennis Meadows, author of *Limits to Growth*, in an interview with Alan White in 2015 entitled, *Growing, Growing, Gone: Reaching the Limits*:

“The economics profession is based on the assumption that continual growth is possible and desirable. Likewise, most politicians have a predisposition for growth because it makes the problems they address—unemployment, poverty, diminished tax bases—more tractable. Instead of having to divide a fixed pie, which gets you in trouble with some constituents, you can grow the pie so that nobody has to make a sacrifice or compromise. So there was—and is—a set of vested interests in the notion of growth.”

Buying into the growth model does satisfy Wall Street investors, but it becomes a barrier to getting at the source of the planet’s current predicament.

A quick Google search of articles on Climate Change produces over 473 million choices. The same search of overpopulation produces a bit over 2 million hits, more than I would have guessed.

Climate change marches are happening all over the world. With chants like, “What do we want climate justice, when do we want it NOW” they march against the inertia of getting off fossil fuels. Students leave their classrooms to protest with signs that say everything negative about our reluctance

to change, everything except deliberately reducing our numbers. If I were a betting person I would challenge anyone to find overpopulation mentioned on any protest signs at any of these worldwide rallies. I have searched hundreds of climate protest signs both at rallies and on the Internet and none referred to overpopulation and its role in our collective carbon footprint.

In this paper, I will explore some of the reasons why I believe climate change is an issue on the table, albeit woefully ignored with any effective actions, whereas overpopulation is virtually absent.

These reasons do not have a particular order, they all act together to keep our foot on the throat of this issue. One of the primary reasons is that we are suffering from what I like to call, “expert-itis”. Those with the proper scientific pedigree do not lend their expertise to this issue. When the best so-called scientific experts in the world don’t mention overpopulation in their reports, it is hard for overpopulation activists to get credibility from the public, journalists or politicians. The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS) warns about the extreme dangers of climate change with no mention of its connection to overpopulation. Under the solutions tab on their website there is no mention of promoting small families. The UCS claims it is promoting science-based action yet reducing emissions is impossible with the continued growth on an already overpopulated earth. The UCS is a group of 250 scientists founded at MIT who can mobilize 25,000 scientist partners. They are not brave enough to tell the full truth about overpopulation’s role in bringing about climate change, thereby sealing the fate of its lack of coverage. They are why it is an uphill battle for overpopulation activists to get the media’s attention.

Paul B. Farrell, journalist for Market Watch, wrote so eloquently on September 23, 2014 that, “We’re solving the wrong problems. Yes, even the United Nations and the 2,500 elite scientists in the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). They’ve updated us with 2,000-page technical reports, every five or six years since 1988. They estimate global population out to 2150 with 12 billion people on the planet. Then, politicians, economists, businesses and families just ignore the disastrous impact of too many people. As problem solvers, the U.N.’s climate scientists aren’t much

different than Exxon Mobil's CEO Rex Tillerson. He admits climate change is real, just an 'engineering problem and there will be an engineering solution.' Same with the IPCC."

Old stories die hard. Even if the world would hear the message from the scientists on high, they are much too invested in their extractive stories. Their long held beliefs would be shattered not to mention their wealth, if they were to convert to a new story about how we need to live much more lightly on our planet.

Jeremy Grantham, a global investor whom I have known about for many years, is bold enough to tell the truth, "Many commentators who worship at the altar of perpetual growth and whose incredible skills of issue avoidance are given the credibility of regular space in mainstream media, fail to see the big picture. They ignore warnings, blind to the long-term consequences, not because there is no evidence, but because they do not fit with their long-held convictions." (*Jeremy Grantham, global investor*)

We also live in a post fact world thanks to the presidency of Donald Trump. He just exceeded telling and texting 10,000 provable lies to the American public. We like to believe lies rather than inconvenient truths like Al Gore discusses in his many books. Richard Heinberg of the Post Carbon Institute takes it one step further. He feels we are living in a world divorced from ecology reality:

"Climate discussion conferences have taken place in a conceptual fantasy world in which climate change is the only global crisis that matters much; in which rapid economic growth is still an option; in which fossil fuels are practically limitless; and in which the subject of human overpopulation can barely be mentioned."

The weather is constantly in the news. More intense storms and flooding reinforce the message that climate change is real and it is happening now. Even though main stream media meteorologists and weather reporters rarely connect the dots for their viewers during their broadcasts, there is enough discussion in the general public discourse that allows for many Americans to conclude that when it comes to climate change, the future is now.

In addition to this culture of ignoring this issue, I propose that stories become a part of our news cycle

and a part of our culture when there is an identifiable and easy to vilify enemy. It was easy back in 2015 for then president Barack Obama to support the science of climate change with his statements such as, "no challenge – poses a greater threat to future generations than climate change." But presidents from the most conservative to the most progressive stay far away from the topic of overpopulation.

I have long assumed that the only reason that overpopulation is such a hard sell is that it is surrounded by fear and misunderstanding. The fear is huge. The misunderstandings are monumental. No politician wants to step into this potential quicksand. The potential solutions to the overpopulation issue make people uncomfortable, so uncomfortable that it is ignored, denied and discounted to the peril of us all.

In the countless talks I have given on this topic over the years I always sensed that the problems the general public had with it was less with the premise of too many people and more about the minefields surrounding the possible solutions. China's one child policy is known for its draconian implementation and not for its success in saving millions from starvation. That is often the go-to image people have when overpopulation is brought up to the uninformed. It is certainly a big obstacle but a deeper look is required. There are additional reasons that keep overpopulation closeted. To explore them will hopefully help overcome our critical need to name and blame overpopulation as a driving force in the future collapse of the world as we know it.

The fossil fuel industry and their investors long ago deliberately distracted the world from the science of climate change while they increased their extractive policies. They are easy to hate. Bill McKibben, climate activist and author, has repeatedly told the story of how these villains believed the science of climate change enough to plan for seas to rise and rebuild their oil rigs. They are so easy to hate because they sacrificed the planet for their portfolios.

Who is the enemy in the story of economic inequity? The upper 1% and they too are easy to target. Who is to blame when cancer causing chemicals permeate our soils and water supply? The chemical industry is the demon, another very easy entity to detest.

But who is the enemy in the overpopulation story? Well that would be us and our reproductive choices. Family size is complicated because cultural and religious reasons often determine how many children a woman has. Access to birth control is also unequal around the world and a big part of the issue. People are framed as the enemy of the overpopulation issue and that is problematic.

Another reason for the greater success of climate change over the issue of overpopulation is the distraction of climate change deniers and their fossil fuel industry backers. Climate change activists have had to waste a lot of their time defending their issue to naysayers and have not been able to afford to broaden their base in order to accommodate overpopulation and its activists.

Overpopulation has its own internal battles. Consumption is often debated as the real issue and not total numbers of humans. The debate emphasizes technology and behaviors as more important, thereby relegating overpopulation into an un-supported pile of forced irrelevancy. We can certainly reduce our carbon footprint and should do so whenever possible. But billions of people just can't help but lead a chorus of destruction just by being human. Numbers are inextricably linked to consumption. If 1 million or 2 billion people are throwing away 3 pounds of trash a day, it makes a difference. We may be able to abandon our meat based diets, change our form of transportation, reuse and recycle more products, but just the need for fresh water, sanitary sewer and other basic infrastructure makes our collective actions unsustainable over time.

The taboos that envelope this issue exist for a reason. We collectively bristle at the thought of too many people on our planet because it challenges a deep seeded, culturally imbedded story. If we are created in our creator's image and that deity is all powerful and omnipotent, then that god would not allow us to become a problem in our numbers alone. No matter how much evidence the scientific community can muster, the barriers to fully grasping the very concept of overpopulation weigh heavy on the shoulders of our collective cultural mindset.

Climate change is certainly not without its controversies. It is challenged by those who are invested in the fossil fuel industry and their apologists who benefit from their lies.

The climate change deniers are well funded. Sally Hardin and Claire Moser (*Sally Hardin is a research analyst for the Energy and Environment War Room at the Center for American Progress Action Fund. Claire Moser is the director of the Energy and Environment War Room at the Action Fund*). They explained how we just need to follow the money in their article on "Climate Deniers in the 116th Congress," posted on Jan 28, 2019 about the 2018 midterms. The authors describe a campaign to defeat a carbon tax in Washington state which vastly outspent its opponents after raising \$31.5 million—nearly all of it from out-of-state oil companies—for advertising and public messaging. Coal magnate Bob Murray's spending during the 2016 elections provides yet another example of this underhanded influence. Murray gave President Donald Trump and affiliated groups millions of dollars, expecting—and receiving—policy favors in return, such as their help bailing out the failing coal industry. With those kind of opponents, it is easy to see why climate change activists have been so focused on fighting these well-funded liars.

I further propose that the climate change issue has been so successful in dominating the limited bandwidth of our environmental attention span because there are economic incentives for doing so. There are entire industries devoted to solving or at least mitigating climate change. So-called green technologies, from carbon capture devices to solar panels, are the recipient of research and development dollars in an effort to mitigate climate change gases into the atmosphere.

In many other papers and talks I have challenged the very nature of these technologies because of the need for fossil fuels to create and distribute them. I continue to challenge their ultimate ability to make the desired carbon reductions in a world that is overpopulated and growing by 1 million people every 4.5 days. That point has been made by many including Ozzie Zehner, in his book *Green Illusions, the Dirty Secrets of Clean Energy and the Future of Environmentalism* (2012.)

My point here, however, is that many companies benefit economically on the premise that climate change is human-caused. Without an accepted narrative by enough people in power, that the threat of human caused climate change is indeed a crisis, there is no push for green industry investment.

A strong indication that this is an accepted and captivating story is that in 2018 there were 279.8 billion dollars invested in green technologies. The overpopulation issue can make no such economic claim.

The videos of starving polar bears, melting icecaps, more intense storms and the like are horrifyingly real. It is not easy for journalists, activists or politicians to attach them to human caused climate change, but it is a whole lot easier to do that than to say it is connected to our bloated human numbers.

We are adding 10,000 consumers an hour to our already seriously overpopulated planet. In the US the annual per person carbon footprint ranges from 8 tons (for the homeless population) to 20 tons for the more affluent. Globally that average is 4 tons per person including the US according to research done by MIT. When one is trying to drastically lower our carbon footprint, even the math-challenged must admit it is impossible to reduce our footprints without reducing our numbers.

Perhaps we are just bad at math. A recent national survey from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development found that 82% of adults couldn't determine the cost of carpeting when given its dimensions and price per square yard.

We throw around the fact that we will soon reach 8 billion people, yet how many really understand the significant difference between a million and a billion? How many understand that if you snapped your fingers every second that you would need to keep doing that for 11.5 days to reach one million seconds, but that you would have to continue for 31.75 years to reach one billion? More important still how many understand exponential growth? Growth by a few percent seems insignificant but it is far from it if you understand the exponential function.

A late great colleague of mine, Dr. Al Bartlett, professor emeritus of physics at the University of Colorado once said, "The greatest shortcoming of the human race is our inability to understand the exponential function." Bartlett applied the laws of sustainability to growth on our finite planet. He taught that if one divides 70 by the percentage of growth per year, just 2 % growth rate doubles the rate of the use of a resource or the size of world population in 35 years.

That means, for example that at just 1.18% growth rate India will double the size of its population in 59 years, or a total of over 2.6 billion will be trying, in 2076, to exist in a country 1/3 the size of the US. Of course that is theoretical because lack of room, resources and disease are factors that will affect that outcome.

Many feel that the overpopulation issue threatens their freedom of choosing their family size based on desire and family wishes. Agency is extremely important in American culture. We want our freedom of choice and we place a high value on individual actions. Thomas Jefferson established the value of liberty and self governance in our society, though that did not include women or people of color at the time, it still became a core value for all to desire. Freedom to choose and practice one's own religion was a key issue in the founding of our country, and religion has had a huge role to play in the number of children we have. Our liberty has translated to doing whatever we want to in light of the doctrine we choose or feel we must follow, ecology be damned.

The right to choose our family size is a core value. Things like the cost of day care are actually working to insure smaller families, as rates for such services continue to rise in a world of lower and lower wages. Senator Elizabeth Warren may be inadvertently helping population to grow by proposing universal child care in her presidential bid for 2020. Without understanding the elements involved in overpopulation, our deeds of justice may ultimately undermine our goals to make the world a better place.

Over and over again those who are in the fight to save the planet from the evils of climate change ignore the overpopulation issue. They do not want to challenge our agency, religious stories or fight the economics that do not favor an overpopulation-based narrative. They sense, perhaps rightly so, that they will drown out their core message. I couldn't be a bigger fan of activist Winona LaDuke. I have read each one of her books and met her on several occasions. Reader Supported News on April 23<sup>rd</sup> reported how LaDuke proclaimed a pathway to build a zero carbon economy. Her ideas were inspirational and true to a certain point. The list includes dismantling our dependence on fossil fuel, growing more food closer to home and creating less

waste. It did not, however, include reducing human numbers to achieve the goal of choosing the green rather than the scorched path.

Perhaps the biggest hurdle to overpopulation is the word “control”. It sends shivers down the spines of all decent people. It brings up awful histories of genocides. To get beyond this we must use the phrase, “overpopulation solutions” and build it into a message of compassion and caring, for to do nothing is the true doctrine of despair.

### **Our Reflection in the Mirror**

Who gets to advocate for a one child family narrative as a solution to poverty, carbon footprint, overcrowding, species loss and more? Actress Alexandra Paul speaks eloquently about it, the comedic actor Ricky Gervais mentions it, and comedian Doug Stanhope does a whole routine about having a small population. Comedian and talk show host Bill Maher is unafraid to wrap the overpopulation topic into his monologues. What they have in common is that none of them are parents. Comedian Bill Burr frequently has overpopulation as a topic of his comedy and is the father of one young son.

I am grateful to all celebrities who use their influence to try to bring about a better world. They don't have to do anything but sit in their mansions and have parties, but many of them are deeply involved in issues that matter. Celebrity activists who have more than one child can and do discuss overpopulation. They can say that they came into the issue after their reproductive years. I would argue though that it is all that more challenging to get on board the overpopulation train when it appears that you have violated its rules in your own life.

Al Gore, Matt Damon, Robert Redford, Paul McCartney each share a passion for helping change the earth for the better. Al Gore with climate change, Matt Damon with Water.org and Paul McCartney with many animal rights and much peace activism. Robert Redford is relentless in creating films around his strong politically progressive beliefs. Each of these amazing men has something else in common. They each have four children. Al Gore has brought up population as an issue in his books, but has not emphasized it in his talks or writings of late. The rest are collectively silent. On the other hand environmental activist Leonardo DiCaprio

has no children but search his foundation for “overpopulation” and you will come up empty. So it is a factor but it does not always apply.

### **Building a Compelling Narrative**

The deep irony, lost on most, is that our beloved agency is diluted in an overpopulated world. America's population today is not sustainable. At double the size it should be, we often talk about loss of natural resources but we also lose our freedom to move about at a normal speed on the freeways. We lose our rights to own property on a lake when it is all taken and very expensive. We lose our rights to purchase event tickets when they are all gone because the demand has become too high for the supply. We must be subjected to lotteries to get permits to enter wildernesses and yet we somehow do not see that overpopulation is to blame for our loss of agency.

To get people to hear that overpopulation is an enemy we can all learn to hate, we must attach its role in diluting the very thing we covet, our freedom. Our freedom to move about is threatened, as is our ability to get into the desirable schools, to have enough jobs, water, land on which to grow our food and have enough wildlife to make it all worthwhile. It is all threatened by how we have been overrunning our planet in the last 100 years or so. This doesn't have to be an uncomfortable truth, but it is largely an untold one and must be re-framed as one we can all maturely grapple with to ensure a future with more freedoms.

Overpopulation also threatens human rights, animal rights and all issues surrounding social and eco-justice. To demonize overpopulation we must vilify the things it causes and point out the threat it poses to what we love. The NGO, “Having kids .org” takes this position. On their website, they craft a message that is very digestible. They create the enemy outside of ourselves and do it with compassion. They skillfully point out all the things we gain when we choose to have small families. They paint the heroes of this issue as those who choose dignity for their children by paying attention to the world they will inherit. They offer something called a “Fair Start Model.” This model promotes the rationale that planning smaller families increases equality, democracy and preserves a healthier planet

where more resources can be devoted to one child rather than divided among many. They strive to break the taboo on smaller families by attaching them to a better climate future.

Overpopulation robs us of our future. How do we plan our lives, go to college, have our dreams if the future is eaten up by too many people trying to eek out a living on a limited planet? We can learn to hate overpopulation for what it does to everything we love. We can vilify the suffering that results from an overpopulated world, and not those who are doing the overpopulating for whatever reason. Once we have this enemy properly positioned in society, it will be easier to hate and protest.

So how do we make overpopulation a goal of economic investment?

We talk about how our economy is based on natural resources which are diminished by too many people. One cannot have prosperity on a dying planet. If you want long term prosperity, you had better climb on board.

Travis Rieder, a colleague of mine and a moral philosophy professor and bioethicist at Johns Hopkins University, takes an ethical approach. He suggests that “we ought to consider adopting a ‘small family ethic’ and even pursuing fertility reduction efforts in response to the threat from climate change.” To posture this issue in the context of morality and ethics is a fresh approach with much potential. It challenges so many of the pro-natal policies and memes still so prolific in our overpopulated world. How moral is it to willfully add passengers to our sinking ship?

We must come up with slogans that people can understand, “People people everywhere and not a drop to drink.” We must be brave and call out those who do not allow overpopulation its rightful seat at the table.

My friend and colleague Jon Austen, from Population Matters, and author of the book, *Save the Earth, Don't Give Birth*, recently called out the movement, Extinction Rebellion listed in Wikipedia as “a socio-political movement which intends to utilize nonviolent resistance to avert climate breakdown, halt biodiversity loss, and minimize the risk of human extinction and ecological collapse.” Austen wisely points out that they do not ever refer to overpopulation. Many of these groups position themselves against the greedy world of capitalism. They blame our love of money over the love of forests that causes

their demise. It is undeniable that our systems and multinational corporations value money over trees but our numbers also have a more than significant role in how fast we deforest our planet.

Stories that point out the downsides of our continued population growth are out there but there needs to be more of them. One such article by Alex Daniel posted online on July 6, 2018 is right on point. The title says it well: “30 Things Scientists say will happen if the population keeps expanding. The bad news: there is no good news.” The list is long and poignant. It includes things not frequently attached to overpopulation: increase in respiratory disease, infectious diseases, overwhelmed hospitals, increased skin cancers as the ozone layer is damaged, and urban sprawl among them.

This straight forward message means that discussing any solutions that do not include reducing human numbers is futile. I often think of someone trying to sell you an electric car without a usable battery, it isn't going to run.

Back in 2011, Lisa Hymas wrote the article, “8 things you can do about population” for Grist. She included the usual suspects, supporting family planning, sex education, speaking openly with teenagers about sex and getting involved in the Global Population Speak out. I like her wish that those who don't think they want to be parents declare themselves GINKS and that the acronym “GINK” had become more popular in the literature. It stands for “Green Inclinations, No Kids.”

### **All We Want Is a Seat at the Table**

With the obstacles more clearly defined we can proceed to insist on getting invited to forums and conferences on the topic of planetary survival.

We must once and for all retire the taboos of discussing population. We must understand that comprehensive solutions are the only things that work on any issue. When comprehensive solutions are not implemented you end up with smoking in the back of airplanes as a solution.

What if a salesperson tried to sell you an electric car without showing you the battery under the hood? The battery isn't very sexy but it is a necessary and essential part if you want the car to run. Overpopulation is the battery in the car of climate change.

Incorporate, align, include and courageously invite overpopulation to sit down and have a seat at the table where adults are sitting. Adults are those who listen to the evidence without politically motivated agendas. If they truly want to try and shift us away from the horrors that lie ahead they will have to open up to this issue. There is no other choice.

Overpopulation activists are not the enemy of climate change activists, but we cannot be silent any longer. We have economic potential, we have an enemy to vilify and we do not represent a loss

of agency. We are the key to their success, which is in reality, our success too.

I want nothing more than to have climate activists like Bill McKibben, the people in the Extinction Rebellion, Winona LaDuke, Al Gore and the rest become so successful that the planet starts to cool in the middle of their campaigns. Success will always be out of reach, however, without inviting overpopulation activists to the table. Numbers matter and real solutions for this existential threat must be solved together. My bags are packed and I am ready to help fill those empty chairs.



**Dr. Karen I. Shragg** is the author of the book published by Freethought House Press in 2015 called *Move Upstream, A Call to Solve Overpopulation*. She is on the advisory board of World Population Balance and speaks on the topic of including overpopulation in our discourse to groups and at conferences in the US and around the world. Her doctorate is from the University of St. Thomas in critical pedagogy and she is a professional naturalist at the Wood Lake Nature Center in Richfield, Minnesota where she has been its director since 1991. Her talks and books can be found at [www.movingupstream.com](http://www.movingupstream.com).

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