

Environmental Economics

The Cromulent Economics Blog

August 12, 2008

Resources and Population

This post is long and controversial. Have at it.

MR writes: *So I read this book, and I have no recollection of what it was called, but basically it was a deep ecology type economic treatise, and the gist, as I distill and remember it, was basically that a lot of things we do to help the poor, both here and abroad, are really bad for the environment. One harsh take in the book was that by helping keep people fed in areas where people are starving we in effect discourage self-regulation of population, thus leading to further destruction of natural resources, etc.*

Very true. The problem with the Green Revolution, etc. is that we have more people to eat the increased food supply (think Bangladesh). Just like building wider roads leads to more cars (back to traffic jams), the way to reduce population is to make kids more expensive. One reason OECD women have fewer is that the cost of kids (in time, lost career, education, etc) is so expensive. So -- get rich and population drops.* It's MORE ironic that cheap food programs make farmers POOR and lead to greater urbanization.

Thus: End food subsidies (more people) and price controls (less food).

The other point I remember is how all the US tax breaks, etc for having kids encourages people to have kids, and that if we are serious about population and the screaming negative impact it is having on our environment we would economically disincentivize reproduction.

This is the nationalistic (religion too) argument for having kids of the "right blood". Seen that one before, right? If you think that US tax credits for kids are bad, you should see the French, Italians, et al. as they try to encourage kids from the "right people" instead of "dirty" foreign migrants; see [this article](#) on foreigners and disease.

Primitive.

As an economist, what are some possible economic solutions that both help address world poverty in a meaningful way and also encourage a shrinkage over all in population (both globally and locally where it is contributing to local deforestation etc) and resource use?

If more resources (fish, trees, etc) were taken out of the commons (where they are abused by all) and put into private hands, they would get protected (=more expensive) and people would be more careful with them. The poor can benefit from the income stream as well as a larger resource base, but politics (esp. abuse of power) doesn't always lead to that outcome.

There are many ways to (intentionally) slow population expansion, ranging from the draconian (forced adult sterilization, abortion, etc.) to the evolutionary (the demographic shift).

If you are a dictator in search of a truly radical idea, try this: Sterilize one-half of all newborns, leaving half the people fertile ("Breeders") and the other half sterile ("Players"?). The key element in this idea is *expectations*, i.e., the idea that Players would grow up knowing they were not going to have kids. That makes it easier to plan a life around other activities. Although Breeders might face some additional pressure to have more, they would not have many more, especially if they bear the full costs of raising the kids. (Although I'd maintain some subsidies for education, I'd end other subsidies/tax breaks/etc.)

Net result: Cut average births per woman by up to 50 percent.

So easy to figure out what to do for ones self (have one or, preferably, fewer kids; consume little in all material respects, enjoy life and community, live fully, etc), so hard for the layman to have any idea how to manifest positive results quickly enough (if indeed quick is necessary) in the world at large. I would be a horrible world dictator, I know that much, causing a worst case scenario (my subjects, limited to one child, no animal protein, and only renewable energy would revolt within 2 days, pouring gasoline on my grave and running over it again and again in Hummers, while

eating raw beef and using fertility drugs to conceive triplets, whom they will teach creationist theory and human superiority...)

Sad but true: The point of the tragedy of the commons is that the "invisible hand" strangles all of us....

* An [article](#) in the current JEP says that fertility follows a "U" shaped path, noting that fertility is rising again the US and Scandinavian countries.

Also at Aguanomics today:

[Water for America](#)

[Groundwater Adjudication](#)

[Cypriot Water Shipping](#)

[The Business of Water](#)

[Updated Numbers You Need to Know](#)



Posted by [David Zetland](#) on August 12, 2008 at 10:10 AM in [Ecological Economics](#), [Food and Drink](#), [Government](#)

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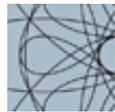
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Comments



[robertdfeinman](#) said...

I don't know who "MR" is, but it sounds like the type of stuff that appears at Marginal Revolution.

One never knows if their amorality is a put on or if they really believe some of the (I don't know what else to call it) fascist stuff they put forth.

One of the key techniques used by this group is the misapplication of statistics. The green revolution didn't cause a surge in population, it was the declining death rate which is mostly attributed better sanitation, elimination of many childhood disease through vaccination and the rise of effective antibiotics.

Countries where the standard of living increases and women become educated and are allowed to earn their own money have falling birth rates.

Rising population trends in the US and parts of Europe are due to immigration, the dominant existing population is still seeing a drop in fertility.

I've never understood using intellectual dishonesty to make an argument, unless you are a paid shill.

[August 12, 2008 at 10:56 AM](#)



said...

Wouldn't you at least be pleased that they were eating their meat raw, rather than using additional cooking energy burning up some of the nutrients?

And personally, I would think that knowing that children are not a possibility might make one care even less about sustaining the world (but this would still probably be less damaging than the multiplier effect of offspring).

If you are going so far as to sterilize a select percentage of the population, why would you choose to inform them? Having a population of unaware sterilizees in the general population seems preferable to an aware population.

-Jared M

[August 12, 2008 at 11:07 AM](#)



Steven Earl Salmony said...

Will Environmental Economics agree to discuss the global challenge posed by the human overpopulation of Earth with the kind of concentrated and sustained attention this looming threat to humanity deserves?

The widely shared and consensually-validated belief in the overall decline in absolute global human population numbers in our time, leading to population stabilization worldwide in 2050, is simply and straightforwardly a specious, inadequate product of preternatural thought as well as a colossal misperception. Many too many powerbrokers inside and outside the manmade global political economy have determined to condone the espousal of an unrealistic belief in population stabilization because it has proven to be politically convenient, economically expedient and supportive of their selfish interests.

According to new, unwelcome, unchallenged and apparently unforeseen scientific evidence from Russell Hopfenberg, Ph.D., and David Pimentel, Ph.D., of the human overpopulation of Earth, we can understand the growth or decline of the population numbers of the human species primarily as a function of global food supply. This means that human population dynamics of the human species is essentially common to, not different from, the population dynamics of other species. From a global or species perspective, more food equals more people; less food equals less people; and, in any case, no food equals no human organisms.

Please consider this request. Could someone at Environmental Economics, possessed of intellectual honesty and courage, ask top-rank scientists to carefully and skillfully examine the emerging science of human population dynamics and report their findings?

Steven Earl Salmony

AWAREness Campaign on the Human Population, established 2001

<http://sustainabilitysoutheast.org/index.php>

August 12, 2008 at 12:22 PM



Bob said...

First, there is no possibility of self regulation of population without birth control. This has either been banned by religious fanatics or has been unavailable due to cost. The United States could tie aid to the use of birth control. But the religious fanatics would never let it pass.

Second, I believe it is much safer for decisions relating to the commons to be made by a democratically controlled government than the quasi corporate fascist state that we have now. Our government in the U.S. is not a democracy but is controlled primarily by extremely wealthy corporations and extremely wealthy individuals. The media (CNN, ABC, Fox, etc) services those same corporations and individuals and slants all of their coverage to please them. Thus, we have little unbiased information available. The only solution is to take away the power of these institutions and the only way to do that is to redistribute the wealth that they control. That means higher upper bracket income taxes and higher corporate taxes, higher minimum wage (tied to inflation) and an expansion of public works projects to keep the economy moving. However, the religious fanatics in this country are against it as are the wealthy and the brain washed libertarians. So this will never happen.

Finally, there was a lot of griping in the U.S. about the one child policy in China. The bitching was mostly from the religious fanatics. Think how bad things would be now in China had they not implemented that policy. Everyone in the world is better because of it. Thank you China for have done your part.

So I propose that it is the religious fanatics and not the environmentalist that have caused the current state of ruin.

By the way, MR seems to be quoting someone else in much of the above for the purpose of stimulating conversation. Not sure what feinmann is talking about.

August 12, 2008 at 12:27 PM



Bob said...

The food availability argument is a non-starter. First of all it's obvious that there would be a correlation but the correlation coefficient is not 1 (so you could have a discussion on what the correlation coefficient is - what good is that going to do?). Secondly, you may as well just go into overpopulated areas with machine guns and shoot everybody that is starving. That way you won't prolong the suffering. (Oh, I forgot, that's what they are doing now).

It would be more ethical to trade depo shots for food. Only give women food and only after they have the shot. No one dies, no one suffers, population drops. However, religious fanatics in the U.S. and in the countries we would be trying to help would not allow this. There are also certain liberals who say the choice should be up to the individual. Well, if we are at carrying capacity of humans then one additional birth results in a death and it most likely will not be the new child. If the new parents know this in advance is it murder? So birth results in death - forced or coerced depo shots seem a little more ethical in that scenario.

August 12, 2008 at 01:48 PM



Dano said...

Wow. Any time Bob is in the Front Range area, he can count on a frosty beverage on me.

The only problem with the 'get rich and # of children drops' argument as being a valid solution to lessening environmental problems is that the rich consume more resources.

This is not to give fodder to the addled simpletons to state that anyone on earth is advocating sending everyone back to the standards of, say, AD 1371.

This is to say that the EKC equation set is of limited value in setting policy, as usually it is the decreasing slope that is focused upon, rather than the (absolute impact x population) term of the equation.

That is: $I = P \times A \times T$ is a much better policy-setting equation. Impact = Population x Affluence x Technology.

And the issue with the 'more privatizing commons' argument is not just that it helps a little bit (not enough to sustain), but that it presumes that:

o private holders actually care about maintaining resources for everyone,

o private holders who care about maintaining resources for everyone actually possess symmetric information to calculate Pareto optima. That is: not in this manifestation of corporatocracy and corporate control of capital.

This is not to give fodder to the addled simpletons to state that socialism and command 'n' control gummint is what is being argued here.

Best,

D

August 12, 2008 at 02:28 PM



joshua corning said...

If more resources (fish, trees, etc) were taken out of the commons (where they are abused by all) and put into private hands, they would get protected (=more expensive) and people would be more careful with them. The poor can benefit from the income stream as well as a larger resource base, but politics (esp. abuse of power) doesn't always lead to that outcome.

Magically this solution does not work with water. Water has special powers that befuddles economists and forces them to advocate for taking private water rights and turning them into common water rights.

August 12, 2008 at 03:07 PM



joshua corning said...

Thus, we have little unbiased information available. The only solution is to take away the power of these institutions and the only way to do that is to redistribute the wealth that they control.

The widely shared and consensually-validated belief in the overall decline in absolute global human population numbers in our time, leading to population stabilization worldwide in 2050, is simply and straightforwardly a specious, inadequate product of preternatural thought as well as a colossal misperception. Many too many powerbrokers inside and outside the manmade global political economy have determined to condone the espousal of an unrealistic belief in population stabilization because it has proven to be politically convenient, economically expedient and supportive of their selfish interests.

The only problem with the 'get rich and # of children drops' argument as being a valid solution to lessening environmental problems is that the rich consume more resources.

Hey Zetland after this barrage of crack pot nuttury can I get an apology for when you said I don't know anything about economics?

August 12, 2008 at 03:18 PM



David Zetland said...

@Joshua --

- 1) I don't think I've ever said anything about your economics "abilities".
- 2) I've never advocated taking private water and turning it into a commons. Given that -- which economists are you talking about?
- 3) "rich consume more resources" is crackpot?

I think you are shooting too fast again. I'm known for "ready, fire, aim" -- but you're just "fire" :)

August 12, 2008 at 03:23 PM



joshua corning said...

Finally, there was a lot of griping in the U.S. about the one child policy in China. The bitching was mostly from the religious fanatics. Think how bad things would be now in China had they not implemented that policy.

As bad as the apocalypse-that-wasn't we call India?

You might have noticed that in the 50s and 60s China had less people with more of them starving than they do today.

August 12, 2008 at 03:24 PM



joshua corning said...

- 3) "rich consume more resources" is crackpot?

Yup.

http://www.pacinst.org/press_center/usgs/per_capita_water_use.gif

August 12, 2008 at 03:28 PM



David Zetland said...

Joshua -- you are mixing up level and change. Try these:

http://atlas.aaas.org/natres/energy_popups.php?p=consume

Energy seems the best proxy for "resources"

http://atlas.aaas.org/natres/water_popups.php?p=fwcnp

Although the latter *appears* to make your point, you will note that the US and Canada are the developed countries there. The developing countries are not as much "poor on their way to rich," but mismanaged command and control economies.

August 12, 2008 at 04:01 PM



Dano said...

It's good to know that in Wingnuttia water is an acceptable proxy for 'all resources'. Surely energy is a better proxy, but hey.

Here in crackpottia (98% of the world's human population), the rest of us will continue knowing the utterly basic fact that wealth equals resource consumption.

Meaning impact, not perfect as we must consider population.

Oh, wait: I=PAT.

Best,

D

August 12, 2008 at 04:09 PM



joshua corning said...

Joshua -- you are mixing up level and change.

The US of the 1950's was not a poorer nation then the US of the 2000's?

It would seem comparing the same nation over time would be better (it controls more variables) rather than comparing other nations to one another.

2) I've never advocated taking private water and turning it into a commons. Given that -- which economists are you talking about?

I think it would be the one who advocates for centralized price controls on water.

August 12, 2008 at 04:16 PM



David Zetland said...

Joshua:

1) let's talk Haiti vs US, not mildly rich vs. rich.

2) Who advocates central price controls? They're idiots. :)

August 12, 2008 at 04:24 PM



joshua corning said...

It's good to know that in Wingnuttia water is an acceptable proxy for 'all resources'. Surely energy is a better proxy, but hey.

Considering that we are talking about the environment and the environment actually uses water unlike say oil or uranium I think it is a far better proxy.

One does not have to be a genius to see that a poor country that heats its homes and cooks its meal with wood are more destructive to the environment than a richer country that heats its homes and cooks its meal with oil.

Should we not use a proxy resource that actually matters?

August 12, 2008 at 04:28 PM



joshua corning said...

1) let's talk Haiti vs US, not mildly rich vs. rich.

Haiti the land of clear urban skys, clean drinking water and unlogged vistas...give me a break.

August 12, 2008 at 04:35 PM



joshua corning said...

2) Who advocates central price controls?

I would not have the foggiest idea.

http://images.forbes.com/media/2008/07/15/omm-chart_400x351.jpg

August 12, 2008 at 04:42 PM



Dano said...

That's right: according to ~~the king of wingnuttia~~ joshua, rich countries with higher GDP consume products that aren't made of resources. Maybe these resources are made of anti-matter.

At any rate, the ecological footprint map I linked to above shows Haiti's emissions swamping Murrice's, right joshua? Right? Hello?

Good ol' joshua. Haven't shed your clue-repelling suit for more fashion-forward garb, have you? Ah, well. Thanks for the laugh.

Best,

D

August 12, 2008 at 05:02 PM



Bob said...

Joshua is right about one thing - cooking with oil is better than cutting down trees to do it.

The argument about redistributing wealth is not exactly "crackpot nuttury." (Nuttury seems to not be a word, Joshua). (By the way, I never said anything about price controls). My proposal is no different than what was done in the 1930's by FDR. It did not end the country. In fact, it empowered many who otherwise would have been left behind. Many of those

individuals went on to start their own businesses and in their own world were more productive than they would have been otherwise. It can be argued that this results in less efficient use of labor nationwide. However, considering the total waste of lives on the bottom of the economic ladder and the crumbling social cohesiveness that we are seeing today, we can afford a slight loss of efficiency and the crocodile tears of the Kravis's and his likes.

August 12, 2008 at 05:19 PM



joshua corning said...

My proposal is no different than what was done in the 1930's by FDR.

Um so your proposal would turn a recession into a 10 year long depression that ends with a world war?

That is not a comforting comparison.

August 12, 2008 at 06:04 PM



joshua corning said...

At any rate, the ecological footprint map I linked to above shows Haiti's emissions swamping Murrice's, right joshua? Right? Hello?

Why live in the US if it is such an environmental hell hole dano?

The pristine lands of Haiti await you.

August 12, 2008 at 06:18 PM

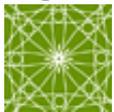


odograph said...

If more resources (fish, trees, etc) were taken out of the commons (where they are abused by all) and put into private hands, [...]

Would you say economists in general think of private hands as the alternative to in-use commons, rather than hands-off commons (designated wilderness or ocean reserves)?

August 12, 2008 at 06:31 PM



David Zetland said...

@ Joshua -- re: that price schedule. You clearly have NO clue what you are talking about. How exactly, would you implement "free market" prices from LADWP to its customers? [consider transaction costs, of course] Centralize price setting is what happened in the Soviet Union (were you around then), during the depression (I'm in vague agreement with you on FDR's policies there.), and at state-run gas retailers. The FACT is that nearly ALL retail water prices are set in advance and my proposal addressed that condition.

@Odograph (if the comment is addressed to me) -- I'd say that economists would prefer private hands, but that depends on what you mean by "in-use commons" -- open access (bad, e.g., N Atlantic cod) or community managed (good, e.g., Ostrom). Hands off commons have a place as a storehouse of biomass, etc.

August 12, 2008 at 10:26 PM



TokyoTom said...

David, one fairly obvious truth on population is that, since we face a world that it is still full of unowned or ineffective

owned resources, we are over-consuming resources and thus over-populating. I addressed this last year in [Too Many or Too Few People? Does the market provide an answer?](#).

What we obviously need are greater, clearer and better enforced private property rights (whether individual or community) and less "socialized" or government-owned property, which is a recipe for kleptocracy. It is also clear that the challenge of improving property rights is one that can be best addressed by free societies using markets and technological and organizational improvements.

It's only with respect to resources that are owned that people will have incentives to protect them and, by engaging in transactions, will be able to express their relative preferences with respect to them.

This is hard work, of course, not only with respect to regional and global commons, but with respect to kleptocracies abroad and socialized property at home.

BTW, what's with truly chilling sterilization idea? I'm afraid that kind of Devil's advocacy is a game I'd rather not play.

[August 13, 2008 at 12:55 AM](#)

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