

# The Myth of Earth's Overpopulation Crisis

Shortly after my wife graduated from college, she joined [Zero Population Growth](#). Looking back, she tells me it was an emotional reaction fueled by reading [Paul Ehrlich's apocalyptic claims](#). In his book, [The Population Bomb](#), Ehrlich wrote: "The battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now."

Ehrlich's book, despite being spectacularly wrong, influenced millions. Zero Population Growth has morphed into the [Population Connection](#). Ehrlich is unrepentant and [still claims](#) the collapse of civilization is a "near certainty" in the not too distant future.

Ehrlich is not the only voice proclaiming the end is near. The UK's "Optimum Population Trust (OPT) believes Earth may not be able to support more than half its present numbers before the end of the century," *The Telegraph* summarized. [The OPT movement](#) has attracted followers such as David Attenborough.

In the US, Bernie Sanders [recently vowed](#) to support "empowering women and educating everyone on the need to curb population growth" as a response to climate change.

Moreover, James Lovelock advanced the Gaia hypothesis that Earth is one "self-regulating organism." Lovelock [forecasts the population](#) of the Earth will fall to one billion from its current total of over seven billion people. Given Lovelock's cheerfulness about such carnage, it is easy to see why Alan Hall, a senior analyst at *The Socionomist*, wonders whether "today's drives to limit consumption and population" are ideologically related to the eugenics movement from the past century. In his essay "A Socionomic Study of Eugenics," Hall

writes in the [Socionomist](#):

*Circa 1900, influential intellectuals in Europe and the U.S. voiced concerns about uncontrolled procreation causing a supposed decline in the quality of human beings. Today, similar groups voice concerns about uncontrolled population growth and resource consumption causing a decline in the quality of the environment...Today's green advocates brandish images of an overrun, dying planet.*

Today, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is working to aid the lives of children living “in extreme poverty.” In his book, [Factfulness](#), the late professor of international health Hans Rosling, reports on critics of the Gates Foundation who reject such efforts. “The argument goes like this,” Rosling writes. “If you keep saving poor children, you’ll kill the planet by causing overpopulation.”

In the face of advocates for such beliefs, no wonder Hall asks us to reflect on whether we “will make the cut” if those seeking to cull humanity are successful.

## Malthusian Doom

We’ve all heard the SparkNotes version of Malthusian predictions of doom caused by overpopulation. Malthus thought food production could not keep pace with population growth. In his 1798 “[Essay on the Principle of Population](#),” Malthus anticipated the suffering that awaited humanity.

*The power of population is so superior to the power in the earth to produce subsistence for man, that premature death must in some shape or other visit the human race. The vices of mankind are active and able ministers of depopulation. They are the precursors in the great army of destruction; and often finish the dreadful work themselves. But should they fail in this war of extermination, sickly seasons, epidemics,*

*pestilence, and plague, advance in terrific array, and sweep off their thousands and ten thousands. Should success be still incomplete, gigantic inevitable famine stalks in the rear, and with one mighty blow levels the population with the food of the world.*

Unlike Ehrlich and others, Malthus had reason to be a pessimist in his lifetime. If Malthus had been writing history or predicting the near future, he would not have been far from the mark.

“The good old days were awful,” observes Johan Norberg in his book [\*Progress: Ten Reasons to Look Forward to the Future\*](#). The year 1868 was one of famine in Sweden. Norberg shares this powerful testimony of a survivor remembering back to his childhood.

*We often saw mother weeping to herself, and it was hard on a mother, not having any food to put on the table for her hungry children. Emaciated, starving children were often seen going from farm to farm, begging for a few crumbs of bread. One day three children came to us, crying and begging for something to still the pangs of hunger. Sadly, her eyes brimming with tears, our mother was forced to tell them that we had nothing but a few crumbs of bread which we ourselves needed. When we children saw the anguish in the unknown children's supplicatory eyes, we burst into tears and begged mother to share with them what crumbs we had. Hesitantly she acceded to our request, and the unknown children wolfed down the food before going on to the next farm, which was a good way off from our home. The following day all three were found dead between our farm and the next.*

Sweden was so poor back in the 19th century, Norberg observes, that “it was poorer, with shorter life expectancy and higher child mortality than the average sub-Saharan African country.”

The population of Sweden in 1868 [was a bit over 3.5 million](#). Today Sweden's population is almost 300 percent larger. Is Sweden more overpopulated today than it was in 1868?

## Overpopulation Is Relative

Norberg writes, "In 1694, a chronicler in Meulan, Normandy, noted that the hungry harvested the wheat before it was ripe, and 'large numbers of people lived on grass like animals.'"

Today people live like animals in North Korea. They, too, eat grass and bark off trees.

Geographically, North Korea is almost 25 percent larger than South Korea. The population of modern South Korea is about double the population of starving North Korea.

Overpopulation is relative to the ability of an economy to provide a decent standard of living, adequate nutrition, and minimize the impact on the environment. Using that measure, North Korea, with more land and fewer people, is overpopulated compared to South Korea. Nineteenth-century Sweden was overpopulated compared to today's Sweden.

If you think South Korea, with its more modern economy, inflicts more harm on the environment than the poor economy of North Korea, you would be wrong.

In North Korea, some [rivers run black](#) from uranium mining.

The poor people of North Korea "harvest forests for fuel and to make fields during a succession of famines... Some people resorted to eating bark," the *Scientific American* noted earlier this year. The result has been [widespread deforestation](#) and a denuding of the landscape.

Ecologist [Margaret Palmer visited North Korea](#), and she saw the "entire landscape was lifeless and barren." She saw a Malthusian nightmare:

*Emaciated looking farmers tilled the earth with plows pulled by oxen and trudged through half-frozen streams to collect nutrient-rich sediments for their fields.*

“We went to a national park where we saw maybe one or two birds, but other than that you don’t see any wildlife,” Palmer said.

Dutch soil scientist Joris van der Kamp reports on the North Korean environmental collapse. “The landscape is just basically dead. It’s a difficult condition to live in, to survive.”

Van der Kamp added, “There are no branches of trees on the ground. Everything is collected for food or fuel or animal food, almost nothing is left for the soil.”

Elon Musk [dreams of colonizing Mars](#), but he can find in North Korea a dead landscape with warmer temperatures, more oxygen, and minuscule travel costs compared to the Red Planet. When communism collapses in North Korea, capitalism will terraform the country at an inestimably small fraction of the cost of terraforming Mars.

## **Restrict the Economy, Create Overpopulation**

Based on its ability to support its human population and protect its environment, sparsely populated North Korea is one of the most overpopulated countries in the world.

Norberg explains what Malthus got wrong.

*[H]e underestimated [humanity’s] ability to innovate, solve problems and change its ways when Enlightenment ideas and expanded freedoms gave people the opportunity to do so. As farmers got individual property rights, they then had an*

*incentive to produce more. As borders were opened to international trade, regions began to specialize in the kinds of production suited to their soil, climate and skills. And agricultural technology improved to make use of these opportunities. Even though population grew rapidly, the supply of food grew more quickly.*

The more specialization and exchange, the wealthier and better fed a growing population will be. In countries like North Korea, Venezuela, and Mao's China, central planning leads to reduced specialization, which leads to starvation. As Matt Ridley explains in his book [\*The Rational Optimist\*](#):

*[I]f exchange becomes harder, [people] will reduce their specialisation, which can lead to a population crisis even without an increase in population. The Malthusian crisis comes not as a result of population growth directly, but because of decreasing specialisation. Increasing self-sufficiency is the very signature of a civilisation under stress, the definition of a falling standard of living.*

Ridley explains that embracing specialization increases human ingenuity and increases the possibility that more people “can live upon the planet in improving health, food security and life expectancy and that this is compatible with cleaner air, increasing forest cover and some booming populations of elephants.”

In short, Ridley writes, “Embracing dynamism means opening your mind to the possibility of posterity making a better world rather than preventing a worse one.”

## Population Growth is Slowing

In their book, [\*Empty Planet: The Shock of Global Population Decline\*](#), Darrell Bricker and John Ibbitson have startling facts for those who believe the population will continue to

explode.

*No, we are not going to keep adding bodies until the world is groaning at the weight of eleven billion of us and more; nine billion is probably closer to the truth, before the population starts to decline. No, fertility rates are not astronomically high in developing countries; many of them are at or below replacement rate. No, Africa is not a chronically impoverished continent doomed to forever grow its population while lacking the resources to sustain it; the continent is dynamic, its economies are in flux, and birth rates are falling rapidly. No, African Americans and Latino Americans are not overwhelming white America with their higher fertility rates. The fertility rates of all three groups have essentially converged.*

Looking at current trends and expecting them to continue is what Hans Rosling calls “the straight line instinct.” That instinct often leads to false conclusions.



Rosling explains why critics of the Gates Foundation’s efforts to save children are dead wrong.

*‘Saving poor children just increases the population’ sounds correct, but the opposite is true. Delaying the escape from extreme poverty just increases the population. Every generation kept in extreme poverty will produce an even larger next generation. The only proven method for curbing population growth is to eradicate extreme poverty and give people better lives.*

With better lives, Rosling writes:

*Parents then have chosen for themselves to have fewer children. This transformation has happened across the world but it has never happened without lowering child mortality.*

In the past 20 years, “the proportion of the world population living in extreme poverty” has fallen by half. Rosling adds that already the “majority of the world population live in middle-income countries.”

When feverish dreams of doom are used to justify controlling the lives of others, restricting personal and economic freedom, expect more poverty and environmental degradation with real overpopulation like that of North Korea. It is capitalism and freedom that lift humanity out of poverty, vanquish overpopulation, and offer a sustainable future.

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