6.5 BILLION AND COUNTING

Since the world’s population reached 6 billion on October 12, 1999, the population has continued to spiral upward at an exponential rate. In only five years since that milestone, the population has increased by 477 million.

No one knows the real population carrying capacity of the earth, but logic tells us that there will likely be a point at which the necessities of survival and quality of life will be sorely taxed for a large portion of the population.

At the time of Christ, the world’s population was 300 million. By the time Christopher Columbus made his first voyage to the Caribbean 1,492 years later, the total population had only increased to 450 million. The world reached its first billion in 1850, its second in 1945, its third in 1965, its fourth in 1978, its fifth in 1989 and its sixth in 1999. At these rates of growth, the seventh billion should come in just four more years, in early 2009.

Pestilence and war largely held the world’s population growth in check until the 1800s. Although few diseases were truly pandemic, or worldwide, in early periods because transportation was limited, nonetheless, outbreaks of deadly diseases often decimated concentrated populations. Among these diseases were the plague, smallpox and influenza.

The classic example of widespread pestilence was the bubonic plague, or Black Death, that ravaged Europe periodically beginning in 1350. It killed half of Europe’s population, as fleas spread the disease from rats, particularly among urban residents.

With the Industrial Revolution in the late 1700s came slow advances in sanitation and medicine, and slow, but steady, increases in population. Thomas Malthus saw the increases in population occurring and published his Essay on the Principals of Population in 1798. He predicted that population would increase exponentially, while food supplies could only increase arithmetically, leading to world starvation.

Of course, Malthus was correct in his prediction of an exponential increase in population, but he was incorrect in his prediction of food availability. He was unable to foresee the scientific innovations that kept food production at pace with population increases—at least into the third millennium A.D.

Food alone is a variable necessary only to human existence. Quality of life depends upon a much broader set of social, political, economic and physical variables, all of which are intertwined with population growth and densities. There continue to be pockets of starvation, although there is sufficient food to feed the world’s present population. However, there are also parts of the world where the quality of life is so abysmal that much of the population lives on the razor-thin edge of anarchy and death.

According to geographer Charles F. Gritzner of South Dakota State University, the earth’s population is now growing at nearly 81,000,000 people per year. This represents the equivalent of Germany’s population being added annually to the world’s total population.

Most of those countries with the highest natural population increases not only have the highest birth rates, the lowest qualities of life as well. In general, these are also the countries with large outmigrations, as residents attempt to flee from poor qualities of life and are attracted to places with higher qualities of life.

According to Goode’s World Atlas the regions of the world with the highest natural increases as percentages of total populations are located in Mexico and Central America, most of Subsaharan Africa, North Africa, Middle East and parts of the East Indies.

There are many issues bound up in quality of life and the world’s explosive population growth. To deny such conclusions is to deny the obvious. How large can we become before natural processes finally hold our population in check?

And that is Geography in the News. September 28, 2005. #800.

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