
Alan Weisman's previous book The World Without Us closed with a brief consideration of humanity's burgeoning numbers and a simple proposal for addressing overpopulation. “The intelligent solution,” he wrote, “would require the courage and wisdom to put our knowledge to the test. It would be painful and distressing in ways, but not fatal. It would henceforth limit every human female on Earth capable of bearing children to one.” Indeed, if today's fertile women chose to limit their childbearing to an average of one offspring, the human population would decline to roughly 2 billion by 2100.

Weisman's most recent book, Countdown, begins where his last work left off. Is this scenario of lowering our global numbers feasible? The author traveled to a number of different countries to investigate this question, probing into demographic trends, cultural attitudes, ecological realities, religious convictions and population policies. He interviewed dozens of people worldwide, including anonymous citizens, NGO workers, environmental activists, wildlife biologists, ecologists, religious fundamentalists and economists, among others. Weisman's research delivers an original, timely contribution to the population question by telling its story from an on-the-ground perspective.

Yet the author's approach goes beyond a journalistic canvassing of a spectrum of views on population. Even as Weisman's own position does not get in the way of fair reporting, a passionate though unobtrusive argument threads through his book. It might be summarized by the blunt and pressing statement that “every emergency on Earth is now either related to or aggravated by the presence of more people than conditions can bear” (393). In case after case the book shows the stark connection between increasing numbers of people and declining ecosystems: wildlife disappearing, forests dwindling, wetlands lost, rivers drying and wild fish decimated. To mention two examples among many the author provides, the Philippines and Pakistan—both countries with steeply rising populations in the 20th century—have experienced dramatic deforestation and biodiversity loss. Bolstered by religious fundamentalisms, their populations continue to grow.

Weisman makes an ecological and social plea for a lower global population as “our last, best hope for a future on Earth.” An important purpose of his book is to investigate whether a world of diverse cultures and perspectives is open to considering such a proposal. While the narrative delivers a mixed verdict, his research reveals some hopeful trends. One is that “a surprising assortment of cultures has found non-intrusive ways to encourage people to have smaller families.” Examples from the developing world include Costa Rica, Tunisia, Thailand, Iran and Bangladesh, which have all lowered their fertility rates to below or near replacement.

On the other hand, polygamous and patriarchic cultures are the most resistant, as are what Weisman calls “enclaves of religious extremism,” found for example in the Philippines, Afghanistan and Haredi Israel (429).

Another well-known trend in the shift to smaller families, strongly corroborated by Weisman's work, involves the paramount importance of educating girls. Wherever women are empowered to control their own fertility, especially by means of education, birth rates swiftly decline. Weisman cites a 2011 Vienna Institute of Demography study that modeled different educational scenarios; the study indicated that “if every country ambitiously invested in schooling girls, by 2050 there could be a billion fewer people than if nothing changes” (418). The significance of education is also illustrated by a striking statistic in India: the fertility rate of women with no education averages 6 children per woman, while women who are educated average between 1.9 and 1.6 children, depending on how long they remained in school. Such figures give a powerful signal that realizing gender equality worldwide—an important cause in its own right—can help move the world in the direction of ecological sanity.

Yet educating girls may have little effect without up-to-date reproductive services, including the provisioning of modern contraceptives and counseling for their use. A case in point is Iran, which saw a fertility drop from about 6 children per woman in 1980 to 1.7 today. This was achieved by combining the policies of a nationwide family planning campaign, promoting the education of girls and women, building a health network that reached the furthest outposts of the country and making birth control available to every Iranian for free. While less well known than Iran's population story, Thailand's swift transition to smaller families illustrates the extraordinary effectiveness of a national population crusade (in this case spearheaded by one person) combined with empowering communities to distribute their own contraceptives.

The importance of facing the population issue for the sake of Earth's ecological integrity and a higher quality of life—and perhaps even human survival, as Weisman believes—is brought home by the following momentous fact: “In the next fifty years we will need to produce as much food as has been consumed over our entire human history” (58). It is difficult for the human mind to wrap itself around the implications of this statement, but it is vital that we try, as so much life hangs in the balance. It is indeed urgent—and a basic human right—that the means of birth control be made accessible to every person on Earth in the shortest time possible.

Weisman's vision of human life on Earth is more profound than aiming for a “sustainable world” in which billions of people have access to industrial food and the planet is bent into the service of providing it. The author cites zoologist Aubrey Manning's assessment that “human beings are rapidly becoming a monoculture—a voracious monoculture. We suck resources in at the cost of the rest of life on the planet” (116). As a whole, Weisman's
narrative orients us toward the possibility of a world where food is available for all living species, not just our own (41); a world that is “less crowded” and “lovelier” (42); in which “we leave space for our fellow species” (431). By reducing our numbers we can free billions of acres for other species, possibly bringing back a world brimming with fish, migratory birds, and other wildlife. To achieve this even a stable population of several billion is not enough. Following the calculations of Paul Ehrlich and his colleagues, Weisman suggests a global population of 1.5 to 2 billion as optimal compared to our present 7+ billion and growing. Such a population level would enable a good standard of living for all, sufficient cultural diversity for a flourishing global civilization, and enough space for wild ecologies and nonhuman species to thrive.

Of course a population of 2 billion people with a predominantly materialistic outlook and little regard for the intrinsic value of nonhuman life would not allow Earth’s ecological restoration. Weisman devotes attention to the destructive effects of a growing global consumerism, calling for a change in our economic affairs to accompany lower numbers. But importantly he also shows that a lower population facilitates the transition away from endless economic growth. In a countryside location in Japan, a nation where population is declining, the author encountered a community cultivating alternative values and a slower life, where “prosperity” has been redefined around “shorter working weeks and quality of life rather than relentless accumulation” (323). In growth-oriented societies where people are burdened with long work weeks, endless to-do lists and a “busy-ness” that seems absurd in an age of human-driven extinctions and rapid climate change, a slower pace and reevaluation of values sound most welcome.

We can work to spread Weisman’s message, breaking the irrational silence surrounding the proverbial “elephant in the room.” Countdown makes a fascinating and most readable contribution by wedding on-the-ground storytelling with gentle advocacy for reducing our global numbers drastically and humanely.

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