

Advanced 1
Unit 6 Reading
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THE OTHER POPULATION CRISIS

A

It is an unquestioned principle that has dominated international thinking for decades: we live in an overcrowded world teeming with billions of humans who are destined to suffocate our cities and squeeze our planet of its precious resources. Our species is inexorably wrecking Earth: flooding valleys, cutting down forests, and destroying the habitats of animals and plants faster than scientists can classify them. Our future is destined to be nasty, brutish, and cramped.

B

Or is it? Now, it seems, population analysts have suddenly started to question the "self-evident" truth that we are destined eventually to drown under our own weight. While accepting that populations will continue to rise, they point out that this rise will not be nearly as steep or as long-lasting as was once feared. They even claim they can envisage the day when world population numbers will peak and begin to decline.

C

As evidence, statisticians point to a simple, stark fact: people are having fewer and fewer children. In the 1970s, global fertility rates stood at about six children per woman. Today the average is 2.9 and falling. Such a rate will still see the world's population increase to nine billion by 2050, a rise of fifty percent on today's figure. That is not good news for the planet, but it is far less alarming than the projections of fifteen billion that were once being made. More to the point, statisticians predict that after 2050 the number of humans will go down. Such trends raise two key questions. Why has the rise in world populations started to die out so dramatically? And what will be the consequences of this decline?

D

Answers to the first question depend largely on locality. In Europe, for example, couples will have only one or two children when they might have had three or four in the past. There are various reasons for this. Women now have their own career options, and are no longer considered failures if they do not marry and produce children in their twenties or thirties. This has taken a substantial number out of the pool of potential mothers. In addition, parents have aspirations for their offspring, choices not available to past generations but which cost money, for example, higher education and travel. These and other pressures have reduced the average birth rate in European countries to 1.4 per couple. Given that a country needs a birth rate of 2.1 to maintain its numbers, it is clear to see that in the long term there will be fewer Europeans.

E

The causes of declining numbers in other countries are more varied and more alarming. Russia's population is dropping by almost 750,000 people a year. The causes are alcoholism, breakdown of the public health service, and industrial pollution that has had a disastrous effect on men's fertility. In China, the state enforces quotas of offspring numbers, and it is expected that its population will peak at 1.5 billion by 2019 then go into steep decline. Some analysts suggest the country could lose twenty to thirty percent of its population every generation. There is also the exodus from the countryside, a trek happening across the globe. Soon half the world's population will have urban homes. But in cities, children become a cost rather than an asset for helping work the land, and again pressures mount for people to cut the size of their families.

F

The impact of all this is harder to gauge. In Europe, demographers forecast a major drop in the numbers who will work and earn money, while the population of older people—who need support and help—will soar. So, the urging by a British politician that it is the patriotic duty of women have children makes sense. There will no workforce if people do not have children. At present the median age of people is twenty-six; within a hundred years, if current trends continue, that will have doubled. More and more old people will have to be supported by fewer and fewer young people. In China, the problem is worse. Most young Chinese adults have no brothers or sisters and face the prospect of having to care for two parents and four grandparents on their own. Pensions and incomes are simply not able to rise fast enough to deal with the crisis.

G

There are people who cling to the hope that it is possible to have a vibrant economy without a growing population, but mainstream economists are pessimistic. On the other hand, it is clear that reduced human numbers can only be good for the planet in the long term. Until we halt the spread of our own species, the destruction of the last great wildernesses, such as the Amazon, will continue. Just after the last Ice Age, there were only a few hundred thousand humans on Earth. Since then the population has grown ten thousandfold. Such a growth rate, and our imperfect attempts to control it, are bound to lead us into an uncertain future.

New Words:

Paragraph A

- **Unquestioned principle:** A belief or idea that is widely accepted without being doubted or challenged.
- **Teeming:** Full of or swarming with.
- **Suffocate:** To cause difficulty in breathing or to deprive of air.
- **Inexorably:** In a way that is impossible to stop or prevent.
- **Wrecking:** Causing great damage or destruction.
- **Nasty, brutish, and cramped:** Describing a future that is unpleasant, harsh, and overcrowded.

Paragraph B

- **Self-evident:** Obvious without needing explanation.
- **Envisage:** To imagine or expect something in the future, especially something good.

Paragraph C

- **Stark:** Severe or bare in appearance or outline.
- **Fertility rates:** The average number of children born to a woman over her lifetime.

- **Projections:** Estimates or forecasts of future situations based on current trends.

Paragraph D

- **Locality:** A particular area or neighborhood.
- **Aspirations:** Strong desires or ambitions to achieve something.
- **Offspring:** Children or young of a particular parent or progenitor.

Paragraph E

- **Varied:** Incorporating a number of different types or elements.
- **Alarming:** Causing worry or fear.
- **Breakdown:** A failure of a system or relationship.
- **Quotas:** Fixed shares or amounts of something that a person or group is entitled to receive or is bound to contribute.
- **Exodus:** A mass departure of people.
- **Trek:** A long and difficult journey, typically on foot.

Paragraph F

- **Gauge:** To measure or determine the amount, level, or volume of something.
- **Demographers:** Experts who study the statistics of populations, such as births, deaths, and disease.
- **Forecast:** To predict or estimate a future event or trend.
- **Soar:** To increase rapidly above the usual level.
- **Patriotic duty:** A sense of responsibility towards one's country.
- **Median age:** The age that divides a population into two numerically equal groups, half younger and half older.
- **Prospect:** The possibility or likelihood of some future event occurring.
- **Pensions:** Regular payments made during a person's retirement from an investment fund to which that person or their employer has contributed during their working life.

Paragraph G

- **Cling to:** To hold on tightly to something.

- **Vibrant economy:** An economy that is full of energy and activity.
- **Mainstream economists:** Economists whose views are widely accepted and followed.
- **Pessimistic:** Tending to see the worst aspect of things or believe that the worst will happen.
- **Wildernesses:** Natural environments that have not been significantly modified by human activity.
- **Ten thousandfold:** By a factor of ten thousand.
- **Imperfect attempts:** Efforts that are not completely successful or have flaws.
- **Uncertain future:** A future that is unpredictable and not clearly determined.

Summary

The text discusses the long-held belief that the world is overcrowded and how this view is being reconsidered. Analysts now suggest that population growth will slow and eventually decline, with global fertility rates dropping from six children per woman in the 1970s to 2.9 today. This means the population will peak at nine billion by 2050 and then decrease. In Europe, fewer children are born due to career options for women and higher costs of raising children, while in Russia, health issues and pollution contribute to population decline. China's government policies and urbanization also lead to smaller family sizes. The economic impact includes a shortage of workers and an increase in elderly people needing support, particularly in Europe and China. However, a declining population could benefit the environment by reducing human pressure on natural resources and slowing the destruction of wilderness areas. Overall, the text highlights that while population growth remains a concern, it may not be as severe as once thought, with different regions facing unique challenges and complex economic and environmental impacts.

The Text in Simple English

A

People have believed this idea for a long time: there are too many people on Earth and they will make our cities too crowded and use up all the things we need from

the planet. We are hurting the Earth: making water cover the land, chopping down trees, and killing the places where animals and plants live before we even know what they are. Our future will be bad, mean, and tight.

B

But maybe this is not true. Now, some people who study how many people there are on Earth have begun to doubt the idea that we will all die because of too many people. They agree that there will be more people, but they say that this will not be as fast or as long as people used to think. They even say they can imagine the day when there will be the most people on Earth and then it will start to go down.

C

Some people who study numbers say this: fewer people are having babies now. In the past, each woman had about six babies on average. Now, each woman has about three babies on average, and this number is going down. This means that by the year 2050, there will be nine billion people on Earth, which is half more than now. This is bad for the Earth, but not as bad as some people thought before. They thought there would be fifteen billion people by then. Also, the people who study numbers think that after 2050, there will be fewer people on Earth, not more. This makes us wonder two things. Why did people stop having so many babies? And what will happen when there are fewer people on Earth?

D

The first question has different answers in different places. For example, in Europe, people who are married will have one or two kids, but before they would have three or four kids. There are many reasons for this. Women can now work and do what they want, and they are not bad if they don't get married and have kids when they are young. This means that there are fewer women who can have kids. Also, parents want good things for their kids, things that their parents or grandparents did not have, but these things need money, like going to college or traveling. These and other things make people have fewer kids in Europe. The average is 1.4 kids for each couple. But a country needs 2.1 kids for each couple to keep the same number of people. So you can see that in the future, there will be fewer people in Europe.

E

Other countries have different and more scary reasons for having fewer people. Russia's people are going down by almost 750,000 every year. The reasons are drinking too much, bad health care, and dirty air and water that make men less able to have kids. In China, the government tells people how many kids they can have, and it thinks that its people will be most at 1.5 billion by 2019 then go down a lot. Some people who study this say that China could have twenty to thirty percent fewer people every time new kids are born. There is also the movement from the farms to the cities, which is happening all over the world. Soon half of the people in the world will live in cities. But in cities, kids need more money than in farms, and this makes people have fewer kids.

F

All this is hard to measure. In Europe, people who study population say that there will be a big drop in the people who will work and make money, while the people who are old and need help will go up a lot. So, a British leader said that women should have kids for their country. This makes sense. There will be no workers if people do not have kids. Right now, the middle age of people is twenty-six; in a hundred years, if things keep going like this, that will be twice as much. More and more old people will need help from fewer and fewer young people. In China, the problem is bigger. Most young Chinese people have no siblings and have to take care of two parents and four grandparents by themselves. Money and help for old people are not enough to deal with the problem.

G

Some people hope that we can have a good economy without more people, but most people who study money are not hopeful. On the other hand, it is obvious that having fewer people is good for the Earth in the long run. Until we stop making more of ourselves, we will keep destroying the last big natural places, like the Amazon. Just after the big cold time, there were only a few hundred thousand people on Earth. Since then, the number of people has become ten thousand times more. This is too fast, and we are not good at stopping it. This will make our future unsure.