**Crowd Control?**

*By Mary Ellen Harte*

*• Unsustainable population growth trumps all of our other problems.*

Think back on what you talked about with friends and family at your last gathering. The latest game of your favorite team? "American Idol"? An addictive hobby? The new movie blockbuster? In a serious moment, maybe job prospects, Afghanistan, the economic mess? We live in an information-drenched environment, one in which sports and favorite programs are just a click away. And the ease with which we can do this allows us to focus on mostly comforting subjects that divert our attention from increasingly real, long-term problems.

Notice that we didn't mention climate change above, or the exploding population/consumption levels that are triggering it -- the two major factors threatening humanity's future. Sure, if you're not too far from the Western wildfires or Midwestern floodplains, the conversation might have turned to the crazy weather that is finally forcing some media to actually talk about climate change in the context of daily events.

But population? Get out. Way too inconvenient a truth.

Take National Public Radio, for example. Of NPR's sparse record of population pieces, just one or two actually address unsustainable population growth. But as the political right whittles away at family planning clinics across the nation, the latest NPR series, "The Baby Project," devotes a plethora of articles to pregnancy, with the most serious subjects the problems some women have conceiving and birthing. If there is even a hint of too many babies, it is well hidden. This, even though a 2009 NPR story on U.S. pregnancies reported that half -- yes, half -- of all U.S. pregnancies are unintended. That's a lot of unintended consumers adding to our future climate change.

And that's what the right calls the "liberal" side of the mass media. The politically conservative U.S. mass media cover unsustainable population levels even less.

That pretty much reflects the appalling state of U.S. public education today on population issues. The U.S. approach across all levels of government, in terms of such things as education, attacks on family planning and tax deductions for children, is an exercise in thoughtlessness. The ramifications, however, are far more insidious and brutal.

Women are culturally conditioned daily to welcome the idea of having children -- plural, not one or none. How to support those children economically is not discussed. Indeed, our abysmal lack of adolescent sex educational programs ensures there will be plenty of young women who secure their destinies, and those of their babies, to brutal poverty and shortened lives through unwanted pregnancies and lack of choice. The latest available statistics from the National Poverty Center at the University of Michigan tell the story: 1 in 5 American children lived in poverty in 2008; 1 in 3 if they were black or Latino.

Sure, there's much talk and concern that birthrates are down and will result in not enough workers to support the elderly. But this argument is overblown; after all, a 70-year-old can be more economically productive than a 7-year-old. And a large, pre-working population inflicts costs on a society. Furthermore, the birthrates in developing nations remain high, and the consequences affect us all.

Globally, the effects of overpopulation play a part in practically every daily report of mass human calamity, but the word "population" is rarely mentioned. Wildfires threaten ever more people because expanding populations are moving nearer and into forests. Floods inundate more homes as populations expand into floodplains. Such extreme events are stoked by climate change, fueled by increasing carbon emissions from an expanding global population.

Overpopulation is also fueling desertification and further deforestation around the world. We can dream of drastically decreasing overconsumption by the wealthy, but even realistic potential decreases are voided by sheer human numbers in all countries, rich and poor. Our unsustainable population levels are depleting resources and denying a decent future to our descendants.

What to do? Stop the denial. Perpetual growth is the creed of a cancer cell, not a sustainable human society.

Promote and support family planning education at the family and community levels as an inexpensive way to reduce poverty and severe climate change.

Support organizations that are trying to get contraceptives to the 200 million women throughout the world who lack and want them, and help them obtain equal rights, education and job opportunities. Access to contraceptives and reproductive freedom are rights, not luxuries, that ultimately benefit all of humanity and its future.

Vote for leaders who vigorously promote those humane solutions. And demand that media start educating the public every day on the role played by the unsustainable human numbers behind environmental degradation and human calamities -- and start covering the solutions.

The public needs a constant message: "It's time to stop growing and become sustainable."

We can do many things to solve environmental, economic and social problems, but each is a lost cause if we cannot bring our populations down to sustainable levels.

Credit: Mary Ellen Harte is coauthor of "Cool the Earth, Save the Economy." Website: www.CoolTheEarth.US. Anne Ehrlich is a senior research scientist at Stanford University. John Harte and Paul Ehrlich contributed to this piece. All are biologists involved in the study of climate change and sustainability

**Questions**: Answer on SEPARATE sheet of paper.

1. Why would radio shows like NPR’s “The Baby Project” give listeners the impression that human overpopulation is not a concern?
2. Why would cultural factors play a role in overpopulation for humans, according to the article?
3. How has the education system in the United States (and worldwide) contributed to the overpopulation epidemic? Is this problem fixable? Explain.
4. Using prior knowledge, why would an increase in population in developing nations effect developed nations like the United States?
5. Using prior knowledge, how can overpopulation lead to things like deforestation and eventually desertification (especially in tropical rainforests)?
6. Why does the author compare human population growth to a cancer cell?
7. What solutions does the author propose for the “crowd control” problem?
8. Do you agree with the author’s claim that “*Unsustainable population growth trumps all of our other problems?”* In a paragraph, explain why or why not.