

# THE ELEPHANT in the ROOM

## Nobody wants to talk about...shhh...population. WHY?

**Kathleene Parker**

Let's talk about elephants! Or, as Bones says in the television series of the same name, "the unacknowledged pachyderm in the facility."

They metaphorical pachyderm is ignored on our planet—with often negative consequences to real elephants and other creatures. The elephant—population—is huge and growing, but we run our world as though it doesn't grow or is of little consequence, when in fact it is probably the single most powerful force influencing the planet or our lives. From climate change, to gridlocked traffic, to rising food and gas prices, to the diminishing numbers of other species with whom we share the planet, it is a primary underlying factor.

There are two types of overpopulation: the more widely acknowledged one of densely populated and, not-coincidentally, often impoverished nations; and the less acknowledged, but likely more dangerous, overpopulation of highly populated and highly developed nations, especially China, India and the United States.

The United States, as referred to in the last Zephyr, with its population of 308 million, is the world's 3rd most populated and 4th fastest growing nation, on track to be a China-like one billion late century. Bangladesh's overpopulation is a huge problem for Bangladesh, but little consequence for the world—not so with our overpopulation.

Famous naturalist and BBC film producer Sir David Attenborough recently focused on the elephant in the room when he spoke to Britain's Royal Academy of Arts and Commerce.

"I suspect that you could read a score of reports by (scientific) bodies concerned with global problems—and see that population is clearly one of the drivers that underlies all of them—and yet find no reference to this obvious fact...," he admonished. "There seems to be some bizarre taboo around the subject. It's not quite nice, not PC, possibly even racist to mention it."

Tellingly, Al Gore's *An Inconvenient Truth* called population a primary cause of global warming. Yet, when he defined solutions, he ignored the politically incorrect pachyderm!



fertilizer) costs; and climate change, likely coupled with more droughts and desertification, even as population increases by 80 million a year toward 8 to 10 billion in the mid-to-late-century.

That's up from the 7 billion we will reach later this year and that up from the 4 billion as recently as the 1970s!

Attenborough phrased the situation bluntly, "The sooner we stabilize our numbers, the sooner we stop running up the 'down' escalator. Stop population increase—stop the escalator—and we have some chance of reaching the top—that is to say a decent life for all."

And, perhaps we will have some chance of slowing the largest species extinction—currently underway and directly driven by humans' mushrooming numbers and demands on the Earth—since the die off of the dinosaurs 60 million years ago. Perhaps there'll be some chance of giving the planet's faltering ecosystems, such as the rain forests and the oceans, a chance to recover, and some chance of minimizing the impacts of climate change. Yet, tellingly, there was silence on the subject of population in the voluminous documents issued by the Copenhagen and Cancun climate summits.

Most discussions, reporting and television programs on environmental, energy or resource topics ignore Attenborough's metaphorical escalator and assume that every technological advancement will bring advancement, when in fact technology is not even keeping up with demands created by the spread of industrialization (such as in China and India) and population increase. For example, just one new city recently built in China will use more energy than is conserved in the U. S. with all those Congressionally-mandated squiggly light bulbs!

The silence on population is largely because of the disproportionate influence on public officials and policy held by Big Media—owned by major corporations with a stake in keeping population booming everywhere—which ignores or overtly misleads on the topic.

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**Bangladesh's overpopulation is a huge problem for Bangladesh, but little consequence for the world—not so with our overpopulation.**

Attenborough warned that British scientists, including the previous president of the Royal Society (the equivalent of our National Academy of Sciences), had "referred to the approaching 'perfect storm' of population growth, climate change and peak-oil production, leading inexorably to more and more insecurity in the supply of food, water and energy."

Peak oil—another dangerous and ignored pachyderm—was an issue raised in the 1950s by Exxon scientist M. King Hubbert, who predicted that the world was reaching peak oil production after which supplies would dwindle rapidly. He correctly forecast U. S. peak oil in about 1970 and predicted that peak oil for the planet would arrive near the beginning of the 21st century. While global oil-production numbers are still being evaluated, some believe that has happened. Critically, the second half of oil reserves will be harder to find, more costly (in dollars and in energy) to extract and must fuel a population billions higher and more energy-demanding than that which used the first half of oil reserves!

Attenborough warned—as do an increasing and ever-more vociferous number of those who study resource issues—of a likely looming planetary disaster resulting from a convergence of dwindling fuel supplies; less favorable agricultural conditions (depleted soils, less water for irrigation), along with rising fuel (and

In the United States, we hear about the "stable birth rate" or our "low" one-percent growth rate. Yet, births in 2007 exceeded the 1957 peak of the baby boom, while a one-percent growth rate means the population will double in less than 60 years!

The media tout the Green Revolution, ignoring that the scientist who pioneered it, Norman Borlaug, warned that, at best, he was buying the world a few decades to address population. Indeed, with rising fuel prices and greater costs to pump water or harvest and ship crops, dwindling water supplies globally, the rising costs of pesticides and fertilizers and other factors, the Green Revolution is faltering.

The media do not tell us that in some nations many couples have no access to family planning. In others, like the Philippines, birth control is illegal, no matter a couple's religious beliefs or desperate circumstances—such as the need not to have a 5th or 6th child.

Remember the moral outrage over China's one-child policy, coupled with the silence as to the disaster China confronted without it? (I do not favor China's draconian policy. Taiwan, Iran and other nations achieved far better results through education, incentives and by appealing to patriotism.) Conversely,



there is near media silence on the lack of global leadership or funding for voluntary family planning, including in some of the most volatile nations, like Egypt, with a young, exploding, well-educated population, few jobs and famine lurking on every horizon.

**This is the worst, most arrogant form of "rich versus poor" politics. After all, it is poor nations that will pay the highest price for the global warming caused mostly by developed nations ...the slightest increase in drought or desertification —the slightest increase in the severity of storms or in sea levels— will hurt the poor first, worst and always.**

The media gush about Brazil, now a whopping 200 million people with a booming economy, ignoring that much of its energy and growth come at the expense of the rain forest. Domestically and in Europe, the media theme is handwringing over the "birth dearth," a la conservative commentator Ben Wattenberg, or not enough young people to care for the old, a theme Attenborough blasts.

"The notion of ever more old people needing ever more young people, who will in turn grow old and need ever more young people and so on ad infinitum is an obvious ecological Ponzi scheme," he said, pointing out that the only population

policies in most rich nations (including our own,) with their huge per-person environmental footprints, are policies encouraging more growth!

This is the worst, most arrogant form of "rich versus poor" politics. After all, it is poor nations that will pay the highest price for the global warming caused mostly by developed nations. Since poor nations survive on the margins, the slightest increase in fuel prices, hence food prices—the slightest increase in drought or desertification—the slightest increase in the severity of storms or in sea levels—will hurt the poor first, worst and always.

That's an elephant that it is more than time—morally, ethically, intellectually, scientifically—to acknowledge!

# U.S. CENSUS BUREAU POPULATION CLOCK

U.S. 311,320,136

World 6,917,346,625

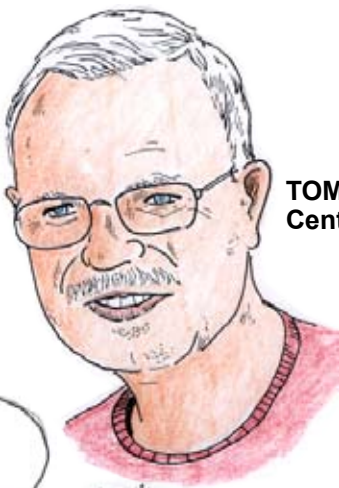
As of: 16:40 UTC (EST+5) May 09, 2011

for a live update:

<http://www.census.gov/main/www/popclock.html>



**MICHAEL BROHM**  
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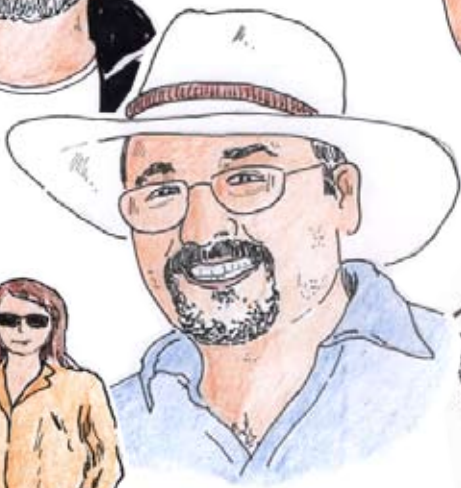
**STEVE LESJAK**  
The Sonora



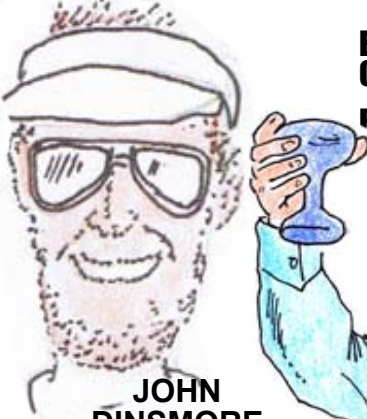
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Lawnchair Point, UT



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**EVAN CANTOR...**  
Boulder, CO



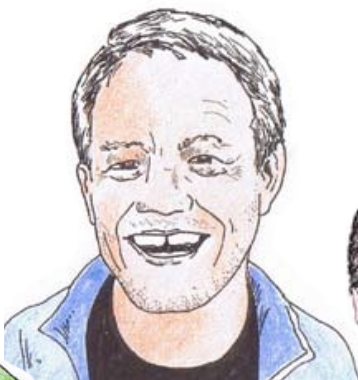
**DAVE WILDER**  
Camp Verde, AZ



**JOHN DINSMORE**  
The Other Side



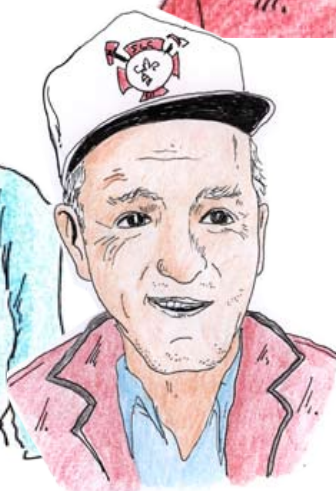
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