

A Special Moment in History?

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This past week on October 12th, 1999, the human population of the world passed the six billion mark.

How do we make sense of this number, "six billion?" Most of us can grasp a "million," but how much is a "billion," really? Think in terms of seconds. How many days would pass if we allowed one **million** seconds to tick off? The answer: twelve days. Now, how much time would one **billion** seconds occupy? The answer: 32 years. Yes, "years"!

Population growth doesn't stop at six billion. We are adding almost 10,000 people to the planet each hour; one million every five days; another billion every 15 years.

The population explosion is an utterly modern phenomenon. It wasn't until 1850, after tens of thousands of years of human history, that our numbers finally reached one billion. Then, population doubled to two billion in just eighty years largely because of dramatic increases in sanitation and disease control. In the forty year span from 1930 to 1970, our numbers doubled again, from two to four billion; and now just 30 years later we have reached six billion.

And population growth isn't something that occurs in far off places; it is occurring right here in the U.S. We are now adding roughly three million people to our population each year.

In the past we made the mistake of thinking that the population problem was only about human numbers. The solution, we thought, was to think of ways of helping those folks in developing countries to have fewer kids. Now we know better. Human numbers, alone, are not the problem. What matters most is how each of us lives--our lifestyles.

Consider: Although we in the U.S. represent only 4.6% of the world's population, we consume 25% of the world's resources. Because of our profligate consumption, an American family of four exerts an impact on the earth equivalent to a Chinese or Indian family with 20 or 30 children. It turns out that we are the ones with the "big families".

It is easy to overlook the connection between rampant consumption and the health of our environment. I remember two years back when the headlines of the CDT announced that: 1) the temperature of the earth had reached a record high; and 2) holiday shopping was breaking all past records. I brought that newspaper to my Environmental Science class at Penn State and asked the students if they saw any connection between these two records--a warmer earth and record holiday shopping. No one was able to see that every time we buy something we are consuming energy. All our products are made, transported, processed using energy (fossil fuels). The use of this energy releases carbon dioxide to the atmosphere which in turn contributes to global warming. The two records were inextricably connected.

A recent article by Bill McKibben in The Atlantic Monthly provides a clue for how we Americans might respond to the population-consumption conundrum. McKibben wrote, "We may live in the strangest, most thoroughly different moment since human beings took up farming 10,000 year ago." He suggested that we are at "a special moment in history"--a time when striving for continued growth is no longer adaptive and simply cannot continue.

Fortunately, just in the last few decades, increasing numbers of Americans have come to recognize that our drive for more consumption--more growth--more stuff--is leading to the deterioration of the earth; it is not a solution to our problems. Now, many people are beginning to ask new questions such as: In what ways have our possessions become burdens? Does this

new glitzy product meet a true need? What is the real foundation of well being? How much is enough?

Maybe McKibben is right. Maybe "business as usual" is no longer adaptive. Maybe we are at a special moment--a moment that requires new and special things of us.