

# **A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift**

by  
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## **We Will Soon Reach the Next Billion!**

During the time of Jesus Christ, the world population was estimated to be about 150 million people. It took almost eighteen centuries before the population reached one billion people in 1804. About 123 years later in 1927, we had added another one billion people. In 1960, just 33 years later, we were at three billion people. Since then we have been adding one billion people every 12 years, or about 10 million people every six weeks. The world population is expected to reach seven billion people next month around the end of October 2011. Another way to look at it is that it took about 1950 years to reach 2.5 billion people, but only 60 years to add another 4.5 billion. What will this mean as we continue to add people?

Is it that the size of the planet may be too small to contain all these people and future growth? That is certainly not the case as all seven billion people could fit in the City of Los Angeles, assuming about two square feet per person. Some people feel that it is not the population that should be our concern, but rather the consumption of the natural resources. That is like saying the area of a rectangle is not due to the length, but rather the width. It is critical that we address both the population growth and the consumption.

Most of the developed countries have fertility rates less than what is needed for zero growth. So most of the growth in population is in the developing countries. However, China and India, which make up about one-third of the world's population, are starting to grow their economies, and that will lead to increasing consumption. We cannot restrict the rest of the world to live in poverty forever while the developed countries continue to consume at our current rate. We are not going to arrive at sustainability by introducing technologies and changing lifestyles while human population grows indefinitely and most people strive to emulate the life of an American.

One of the biggest concerns is providing food for all these people. The world's area of farm land has grown only 13% since its measurement began in 1961. Since then the population has more than doubled which means there is half as much land to produce the food we eat on a per capita basis. On top of that we have our administration in Washington providing incentives for the U.S. farmers to divert their farm land to grow corn for ethanol production. There are also many projects being considered to grow other crops for the production of fuel. These cellulosic crops include cornstalks, switch grass, and wood chips. They all consist of cellulose which cannot be used for food. When we need farm land more than ever, diverting its use for biofuels is an unconscionable decision. The growing scarcity of water is another major environmental issue, perhaps the most critical today, but it is a subject for another time.

The other side of the equation is the control of our population. Demographers from the U.N. are projecting populations from 6.2 billion to 15.8 billion by the end of the century. The population growth has some momentum so it is almost impossible to stop the growth, let alone slow it down. Research has shown that over 40% of the pregnancies worldwide are unintended by the women who experience them. Of these, more than half result in births that spur continued population growth. So what is the answer? One answer is “education”. Women must be provided the capacity to decide for themselves if and when to have children.

Each nation must become aware of this problem and take the necessary action. The fertility rates must be reduced to as close to 2.1 per couple as possible. With some nations consistently being below this rate, the world population could soon peak and then start to decline to a more manageable number. We must also reduce the consumption rate of our natural resources. In 1960 the ecological footprint, which measures the area needed to provide the necessities for each human being in terms of food, clothing, shelter, energy, water, and a means for disposal, was at a number equal to one-half of the earth’s capacity. By 1980, the ecological footprint equaled the earth’s capacity to provide these necessities. Today, we are consuming the earth’s resources at a rate equivalent to 1.4 earths. This is not sustainable and could lead to a catastrophe.