



August 2022

## The Real Elephant in the Room

### Contribution to GTI Forum [The Population Debate Revisited](#)

Robert Fletcher

Ian Lowe [calls](#) population growth the “elephant in the room” in discussions of environmental sustainability and poverty alleviation, writing, “A taboo in many circles, the population issue has almost disappeared from development, environment, climate change, and food security literatures.”<sup>1</sup> Yet concerns about “overpopulation” have in fact been consistently voiced for more than a century now by all manner of actors and institutions working in international development, from academics to politicians to UN agencies to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Indeed, celebrity economist Jeffrey Sachs opens his recent book *The Age of Sustainable Development* by asserting precisely that “[o]ur starting point is our crowded planet.”<sup>2</sup>

The overpopulation issue is a very common go-to among environmentalists as well. “Our population,” writes celebrity biologist E. O. Wilson on the first page of his recent book *Half-Earth*, “is too large for safety and comfort.” Meanwhile, in *Life on the Brink: Environmentalists Confront Overpopulation*, an eclectic collection of writers come together to “reignite a robust discussion of population issues among environmentalists, environmental studies scholars, policymakers, and the general public.” At the same time, the Foundation for Deep Ecology has launched a campaign called Global Population Speak Out, supported by a collection of evocative photographs, to explore “connections between the size and growth of the human population and key sustainability issues.” The list goes on.<sup>3</sup>

What is so striking about this frequent invocation of the overpopulation spectre is the way it so commonly frames the issue just as Lowe does: as one that has thus far been widely suppressed or excluded from public discussion, but which must be raised nonetheless. Anders Wijkman and

Johan Rockström call it “the forgotten problem”; Randy Alcorn, “the real inconvenient truth”; and various others, like Lowe, the proverbial “elephant on the room.” *Life on the Brink*, finally, claims to “confront hard issues regarding contraception, abortion, immigration, and limits to growth that many environmentalists have become too timid or politically correct to address in recent years.”<sup>4</sup>

### **A Public Secret**

All of this evokes the idea of an “open” or “public secret,” in which something ostensibly concealed is in fact quite well-known yet maintains an aura of secrecy due to the fact that its presentation is usually framed as the “revelation” of something previously kept hidden. Developed by anthropologist Michael Taussig, the public secret concept is so intriguing and confounding because no amount of explicit exposure can usually erase the sense that there is still a secret at its center, since the manner of its ostensive revelation (as something previously hidden) in fact paradoxically reinforces the sense that that one is exposing something that is or at least can be concealed.<sup>5</sup> This is precisely the form that so much discussion of “overpopulation” seems to take.

Those concerned with population growth commonly acknowledge, as Lowe does, that it is the combination of such growth and increased consumption that is responsible for environmental decline. Yet in so doing, they frequently shift quite quickly from a brief nod to the latter to sustained focus on the former, contending that while of course it is overconsumption in a few wealthy countries that is the principal source of environmental degradation currently, imagine how much worse the problem would be if all of the world’s poor end up consuming at similar rates as well. In this way, the emphasis quickly turns from addressing real issues in the here and now to a hypothetical future scenario. Psychologists call this dynamic “disavowal,” where something is superficially acknowledged yet its significance diminished. Such disavowal is precisely what sustains public secrecy. And in the process, inequality itself is actually defended in the interest of sustainability.

### **An Issue of Last Resort**

Those raising the overpopulation specter commonly lament that their efforts to draw attention to the issue inspire condemnation by critics. They also commonly claim that critiquing the issue privileges human over nonhuman needs. But the critique of “overpopulation” is not intended to

demonize those who raise the issue, nor to privilege anthropocentric interests, but precisely to show how a focus on the proliferation of the poor distracts attention from the actions of the rich.

None of this is to suggest the issue of population growth is wholly irrelevant, neither with respect to environmental problems nor to equally important issues of poverty and development. Neither is it to assert that population growth will “naturally” tail off as development proceeds, a position increasingly criticized in the overpopulation debate. Obviously, everyone with any sense agrees that continual unchecked population growth will eventually render the Earth unlivable for most species. And in some places, curbing this growth will undoubtedly require active intervention in support of women’s reproductive freedom, as Lowe advocates. But in discussions of sustainability, population growth should be the last issue addressed, while instead it is increasingly becoming the first, if not primary, problem to be identified.

In this way, a focus on “overpopulation” distracts attention away from what is the most serious issue to be confronted right now: overconsumption of natural resources fueled by an economic system that demands continual growth, not in order to sustain the global population so much as to accumulate tremendous wealth in the hands of the very few. Until this obscene inequity, and the economic system driving it, are adequately addressed, all the attention to population growth in the world will do nothing to halt our environmental and poverty crises.

## Endnotes

1. This piece is adapted from an earlier blog post, which can be found at <https://politicalecologynetwork.org/2016/04/26/why-wont-overpopulation-finally-go-away/>.

2. Jeffrey Sachs, *The Age of Sustainable Development* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015).

3. E. O. Wilson, *Half-Earth: Our Planet’s Fight for Life* (New York: Liveright, 2016); Eileen Crist and Philip Cafaro, eds., *Life on the Brink: Environmentalists Confront Overpopulation* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012); on the “Global Population Speakout,” see <https://populationspeakout.org/>.

4. Anders Wijkman and Johan Rockström, *Bankrupting Nature: Denying Our Planetary Boundaries* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Randy Alcorn, “The Real Inconvenient Truth,” Californians for Population Stabilization, December 5, 2007, <https://capsweb.org/opinion/real-inconvenient-truth/>; Crist and Cafaro, *Life on the Brink*.

5. Michael Taussig, *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999).

---

## About the Author



Robert Fletcher is Associate Professor in the Sociology of Development and Change group at Wageningen University. A former ecotourism guide, he is an environmental anthropologist with research interests in conservation, development, tourism, globalization, climate change, human-wildlife interaction, social and resistance movements, and non-state forms of governance. He is the author of *Romancing the Wild: Cultural Dimensions of Ecotourism* and the co-author, with Bram Büscher, of *The Conservation Revolution: Radical Ideas for Saving Nature beyond the Anthropocene*. He has a PhD in sociocultural anthropology from the University of California at Santa Barbara.

---

## About the Publication

Published by the [Great Transition Initiative](#).

Under our Creative Commons BY-NC-ND copyright, you may freely republish our content, without alteration, for non-commercial purposes as long as you include an explicit attribution to the Great Transition Initiative and a link to the GTI homepage.



Cite as Robert Fletcher, "The Real Elephant in the Room," contribution to GTI Forum "The Population Debate Revisited," *Great Transition Initiative* (August 2022), <https://greattransition.org/gti-forum/population-fletcher>.

---

## About the Great Transition Initiative

The [Great Transition Initiative](#) is an international collaboration for charting pathways to a planetary civilization rooted in solidarity, sustainability, and human well-being.

As a forum for collectively understanding and shaping the global future, GTI welcomes diverse ideas. Thus, the opinions expressed in our publications do not necessarily reflect the views of GTI or the Tellus Institute.