

What We Need to Do to Save the World

By Ben Gadd, 2010

As a veteran environmental activist and general-purpose do-gooder, I have come to realize that the world cannot be saved until the human population is much reduced.

Our present population, which is closing in on seven billion, is not only environmentally unsustainable, it is socially unsustainable. In our vast numbers we are hyper-competitive and cannot get organized properly for the common good. Rather, we organize for common evils, such as war. This could be the end of us all.

Smarter people than I have reasoned that a world population of no more than two billion, preferably less, might be okay.¹ So all the actions listed below are in aid of planned population reduction, done intelligently and not forcibly.

These are also things that are worth doing anyway, regardless of population trends and the state of the planet, because they will be good for our species and others.

At the top of the list: take the personal step of having a small family. Bearing three children or more per couple keeps the population growing. Having only two children per couple amounts to less than replacement, because one in five humans does not reproduce. So stopping at two kids reduces the population. Yet it still allows for siblings, traditionally thought necessary for a well-rounded upbringing. This is the choice my wife and I have made.

Deciding to have only one child is harder, but single-offspring families are common among our younger friends. Intentionally having no children is hardest of all, given the social and biological pressure to reproduce, but it has the biggest impact on the birth rate.

In addition to taking family planning seriously in our lives, here are some things we need to do nationally and internationally to ensure the survival of our species long enough to get our numbers down to a sustainable figure.

- Ban weapons of mass destruction, rein in the world's military-industrial complex and end the international arms trade, all of which are driving us toward world war, which is the least intelligent and most forcible form of population reduction
- As an alternative to warfare, teach and apply the principles of nonviolent resistance and the art of peaceful conflict resolution²
- Establish better relations among enemy nations and ethnic groups that hate one another
- Replace repressive governments at all levels with enlightened ones

¹ Visit the website of population scientists Anne and Paul Ehrlich (www.dominantanimal.org) and go from there. Alerting the world to its overpopulation problem has made the Ehrlichs very unpopular with those in denial, of whom there are many. But the Ehrlichs are right.

² Like the need for population reduction, the need for non-violence is being neglected. To learn more about non-violent resistance, read *Nonviolence: 25 Lessons from the History of a Dangerous Idea*, by Mark Kurlansky (Modern Library, 2006).

- Remove corrupt civil servants and reorganize dysfunctional government departments
- Build democratic institutions and enact progressive legislation
- Bring in proportional representation, which helps to effect political change
- Protect human rights and civil liberties
- Strengthen intellectual and academic freedom
- Observe freedom of religion, and for those who wish, provide freedom *from* religion
- Ensure that courts are fair, and that police forces are honest and effective
- Guarantee ethnic, cultural and gender equality
- Allow women unfettered reproductive choice
- Make contraception, voluntary sterilization, the “morning-after” pill and, yes, abortion, cheap and readily available everywhere
- Provide clean water supplies, basic sanitation and essential medical services throughout the third world
- Put more money into public health, and halt the HIV epidemic
- Worldwide, improve nutrition and physical fitness generally
- Boost emergency preparedness, so we can deal with the weather-related disasters, mass social dislocation and other hardships that global warming is bringing on
- Beef up the social safety net for all, with special attention to the needs of the young, the old and the infirm
- Stop abuse of children as workers, slaves, soldiers, child brides and prostitutes
- Assist education—especially literacy for girls in poorer countries—by ensuring that it is entirely tax-supported and truly universal
- Hire more government inspectors and allow them to enforce health, safety and environmental regulations properly
- Tax the rich and their wealthy corporations enough to restore the funding for indispensable government services such as the ones listed above, which have been crippled for lack of money and staff
- Add an extra levy to all, and protect this money well, to care for the retired as the birth rate declines³
- Get control of capitalism, which leads to unhealthy concentrations of wealth and power, meanwhile demanding constant population growth
- Encourage cooperatives and other non-competitive ways of doing business, especially in housing and banking

³ This is so that fewer numbers of young people do not find themselves burdened disproportionately in supporting large numbers of old people. After equilibrium is achieved at a reduced population, normal attrition with age should always ensure that there are far more working-age people than retired people, so this would no longer be an issue. (In the U.S. and Canada, current mortality data show that the death rate for persons aged 65–80 is 17–40 times greater than that for persons aged 20–40.)

- Halt privatization of public services and return ownership to the public
- Increase wages, bolster job security and strengthen workers' rights, to give everyone a decent living and a sense of worth, which engenders responsible citizenship
- Make exploitive labor practices and corporate damage to the environment unacceptable anywhere in the world
- Erect high standards for doing business generally and apply them in all nations, such that no country attracts investors looking only for cheap labor, low taxes and lack of regulation
- Set up energy-efficient, inexpensive public transport everywhere, and reduce the distances we need to travel to work
- Decrease the environmental impact of global distribution and transport by relying more on locally grown food and locally produced goods
- Switch over to energy sources that do not emit CO₂ or otherwise pollute the atmosphere, that do not produce nuclear waste or destroy ecosystems⁴
- Ensure that all agricultural and industrial activities use minimal amounts of water and raw materials, take up the least land and use the least energy
- Adopt organic farming, and de-industrialize the raising of animals
- Stop overfishing the sea, ban indiscriminate methods that produce "by-catch," and prevent further net-dragging damage to the continental shelves
- Quit dumping waste of any kind or quantity into the oceans
- End marine fish-farming and other harmful forms of aquaculture
- Outlaw the hunting or gathering of any species that is in decline, whether on land or in the sea
- Switch from clear-cut logging to true selective cutting, and protect old-growth forests
- Make certain that the things we manufacture are not produced wastefully or with dangerous byproducts
- Design industrial products to be minimally toxic, to last a long time and to be recycled easily
- Clean up existing environmental messes
- Prevent destruction of the world's remaining wildlands
- Award foreign aid only to countries that have instituted these reforms or clearly are trying to do so

The list goes on, of course. These are just the main points. Truly, if we wish to see our children and grandchildren alive and living in a world that is not a nightmare, we have much to do. Now.

⁴ Solar energy is now cheap enough to significantly reduce the burning of fossil fuels. Solar can be used for heating nearly anything, and it generates electrical power efficiently. Wind power, in the form of the large windmills currently installed by the dozen on "wind farms," is proving to be visually unattractive, noisy, and tough on birds and bats, too many of which are killed by the rotating blades. A new and interesting electrical generator is the "Pelamis" device, a 180-metre-long floating, jointed tube, tethered to the seabed. Each Pelamis unit generates 750 kilowatts of power—enough for at least 500 first-world homes—by flexing as waves pass by it. This sounds pretty benign to me. The devil may turn out to be in the details, but see the Pelamis at www.pelamiswave.com.