

# Is over-population killing the planet?

by Phil Harding, 2007



Rural setting of Phil's upbringing

In August 2007 The Observer Magazine approached me for an interview to gain my personal views on population growth and its impact on the environment. This was to contribute to a special report by Juliette Jowit: "The trouble with babies" which posed the question "Is over-population killing the planet?"

Below is the transcript of my interview which was paraphrased for the article published in The Observer Magazine on 11th November 2007.

Phil Harding, a senior policy adviser living in South West England, was speaking in a personal capacity, to explain why he and his wife took the decision to have two children and no more.

Phil's childhood was spent in a rural part of Essex living next door to a farm. He said this rural upbringing helped explain why he had understood the need to limit population growth from an early age.

We raised our own chickens and ducks, and grew most of our own vegetables. I could see London on the horizon from our home and appreciated that the land between London and my home helped feed London's urban population.

I think that if you have had a rural upbringing, the whole concept of the land feeding the nation's population is something at the back of one's mind. And you don't want to see the countryside's food growing surfaces concreted over.

When my wife and I planned our family in the 1980s we had a strong feeling then that two was the appropriate number of children to have. At most we only needed to replace ourselves; why do more than that and cause additional problems for the country's carrying capacity?

Rising CO2 emissions, resource depletion, growing housing demand, traffic congestion, loss of biodiversity – these, other environmental problems and food security are all made much worse by the growing population in the UK, so I feel quite strongly about it and see it as an increasingly key issue we have to face. But mainstream politicians seem reluctant to address it.

We are told we need three million new houses. Why do we need three million houses? Why do we simply predict and provide? Why don't we work on implementing policies that change the prediction?

The issue of our growing population, and the measures that might be taken to reduce it, is so sensitive it is thus a topic to be avoided by mainstream politicians and many in the environmental movement.

I think the experience of China implementing its one-child policy puts people off. But the Chinese approach isn't the only approach; we have to do things differently.

The stark statistic that I think best illustrates the problem for the UK is the fact that the UK's land area is 60 million acres: that's an acre each.

On your acre, can you grow all your food, absorb all the waste your lifestyle creates, have space for your home, recreational space, travelling space, provide the other resources you need and leave space for public services?

Obviously not. So the UK has to be a net importer of food and resources with its 60 million (and rising) population.

As a result of climate change the planet's land surfaces suitable for growing food will shrink; as this happens, can we guarantee we'll be able to import food? Against a background of peak oil and rising oil prices which will make food production and its transportation increasingly costly, relying on other nations to feed us by not halting then reversing our rising population is a dangerous strategy.

Why assume other countries will always be able or willing to provide for our needs? We need to plan for these changes and become more self sufficient as a nation. The effects of climate change will reduce not increase the carrying capacity of the planet – so if we allow the population to rise ever upwards, more and more people will suffer as a result.

An ageing population, often given as a reason to encourage higher birth rates, is not necessarily the problem it is portrayed to be; as well as living longer, we're working longer, and work is much lighter than it used to be.

We can enjoy a healthy economy with a smaller population: Scandinavian countries, for example, have a high standard of living with smaller populations.

We need to break with the economics of the last century that seemed to think that continual economic growth was required for enabling a good quality of life. Quite clearly this will not be so against a background of peak oil, resource depletion, and climate change – a situation made increasingly worse by the world's endless population growth.

In Victorian times people had large families to make sure that even if some children were lost in early childhood, others would survive. That is understandable against a background of no state pension provision, healthcare or social security.

However, when my wife and I had our children it was not because we wanted someone to look after us in our old age. That is our own personal responsibility to make provision for our old age, not our children's.

Perhaps we as a society need to recognise that planning to have no more than two children is a sensible balance; if you have the misfortune to lose one in childhood, for example, you don't just produce another. Each child is unique and irreplaceable – and should be valued in his or her own right.

The UK has got to set an example to the rest of the world and encourage the United Nations to address the world's rising population as a matter of extreme urgency.

In the UK the approach has to be voluntary and through education – not dictatorial. We can encourage smaller families through the tax and benefits system whilst being careful not to penalise the life chances of children from large families, and by educating our young to take personal responsibility on these important issues.

We can have balanced migration - permitting the number of people who arrive to settle here to be no more in number than those that emigrate - so that on humanitarian grounds we can still accept new migrants fleeing persecution.

This policy can be EU-wide to allow the flow of workers to where they are needed. But we cannot continue to accept economic migrants because this will simply result in much greater economic and social hardship for us all as rising fuel prices and climate change have greater impacts on our lives.

WWF and others have calculated that in the UK we have a three-planet lifestyle; that is if everyone on the planet alive today used the same amount of resources as the average UK citizen, we would need three planet Earth's to support us.

This means that the UK has a greater responsibility than the developing world to curb our population growth because each additional UK citizen places a much greater burden on the planet than someone born in Africa, for example.

I think we do need shocks to make us take action. Hurricane Katrina was a wake up call on climate change for American politicians and the public.

The recent severe flooding in South Yorkshire and Gloucestershire caused a lot of hardship; but the floods demonstrated that, with climate change upsetting our future weather patterns, we as a nation need to plan to be more resilient and better prepared for future events.

I am not saying people should stop having children; it's just less is more. It's about quality of life: the quality of life for our children and grandchildren's generation will be poor if the planet is over-populated. Think about your responsibilities when planning how many you will have.

PR campaigns to encourage people to reduce their environmental impact won't be effective if the environmental movement tries to tell people how to live their lives; environmentalists should lead by example.

It needs to be seen to be cool to have a small eco-footprint – and that includes how many children you have. That extra child has a far greater environmental footprint than owning a larger car and taking the occasional flight.

My wife and I try to do our bit for the planet. Our home is insulated to a high standard, we use low energy light bulbs throughout the house, we do not fly more than once a year, and our boiler is a gas condensing boiler.

As well as trying to reduce the amount of waste we create in the first place, we recycle as much as possible, and have a preference for local food. Although a motoring enthusiast, I do drive much less than I used to and my car is fuel efficient.

Population growth is increasingly recognised as the root cause of most of the environmental problems we face and ignoring this issue makes us all more vulnerable to the effects of climate change and resource depletion.

END

Published at:  
[philharding.net/harding](http://philharding.net/harding)

© Phil Harding 2007

Page 3