

Ecologists refer to a concept called "carrying capacity". In the human context, carrying capacity is the maximum population our planet can sustain. Estimates of carrying capacity have ranged from 1960s figures of approximately five billion, to some estimates of 10 or 11 billion. Ecologists can describe the possible consequences of any population, human or otherwise, exceeding carrying capacity. Human population growth is shown in graph 1. Ever since we appeared on the planet, our numbers have been growing at a tremendous rate. Any population growing like this is liable to exceed its carrying capacity. If population size exceeds carrying capacity, there are not enough resources to support the population and the population must decline. In graph 2, carrying capacity is undamaged, population relaxes back down stabilizing the carrying capacity. Human population growth is occurring at an ever-increasing rate. This gives rise to the other possibility. Many biological systems that grow at a rapidly increasing rate manage to overshoot and damage carrying capacity. Animals do this by destroying their food plants, reducing carrying capacity. Graph 3 shows that this results in population crashing to a low level. It can never be forgotten that we, like any other organism, are subject to the restrictions of biology.

Many present day environmental problems could result in damaged carrying capacity. Intensive farming and fertilizer use has led to the North American mid-west's present soil erosion problems and overfishing has caused depletion in fish stocks such as North American herring and Arctic cod.

Some predict that global warming will also affect the carrying capacity by submerging vast quantities of arable land and drying more into desert. Pressures caused by high human consumption drive these abuses. These pressures may also destroy the very resources we seek to consume.

To get things into perspective, some distance from the media and hype is in order, then environmental problems are not so complex and bewildering. In the cold light of distance, one also sees these problems with their firm root in ecological principles. Thus, the consequences of allowing these problems to persist become all the more unavoidable and frightening.

Developed countries like our own often point fingers, says Shawn McGuire, a fourth year ecology student who is actively involved with the Ontario Public Interest research Group. "Attempts of the North to make an issue of why there is population growth...The only real way of controlling population is looking at real questions of social justice, the living condition of people and improving that", he says.

He points out that population number, as an absolute figure, means very little. What is important is ecological impact on a population. "Although we (developed countries) have 10-15 per cent of the world's population, we are

consuming a vast majority of the world's resources and doing most of the environmental damage," said McGuire.

Scott Findlay teaches a second year ecology course at the University of Ottawa. There is a component of Human Population Growth. He

we need to increase our population. That is nonsense. Canada is already consuming an incredible amount of the world's resources, making its effective population well above 25 million. In Canada, we need to reduce our consumption. As for a population increase, we need

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stresses that human population growth is not just an ecological problem, it is also a socio-logical problem. "People are concerned with a certain standard of living. I don't know how much say, a wolf, worries about his standard of living, but humans certainly are concerned about it," he says.

Pointing to the desire for a good standard of living, Findlay comments, "Some use the argument that Canada is vastly underpopulated, that

it like we need a hole in the head," he says.

When he was asked how to reduce consumption, Findlay responded, "The argument that seems to work in Canada is to point out to people that they desire a certain standard of living, that they want their kids to have a certain standard of living. The way to ensure this is to have fewer children and to use what resources we have in a responsible manner." ●

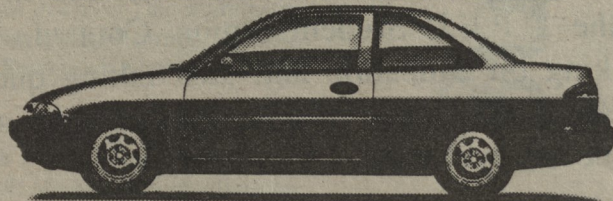
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