

Population

I. Vision

The Sierra Club envisions a world where every person has a good quality of life, with access to education, basic and reproductive health care, and economic and social opportunities. We envision a world where women participate equally in every facet of daily life and in family, community, and national decision-making. We also envision a world where human beings live in harmony with nature and protect it.

From 1900 until 2007, the human population grew from 1.7 billion to 6.6 billion. That rapid growth not only threatens humanity's ability to achieve what we envision, but also threatens the natural environment on which all depend for survival. The larger the human population, the greater the economic output must be to raise individual living standards to acceptable levels. Industrialization and modernization have brought great economic strides – but also pollution of air, water, and land; loss of wilderness, wildlife, and biodiversity; and changes in our global climate. Places where poverty persists suffer environmental damage stemming from poverty itself as people struggle for the resources they need to survive.

Population pressure causes environmental harm, but so does the excessive use of resources associated with Western consumerism. Any call to reduce stress on Earth's resources by slowing global population growth must include an equally energetic call to stop destructive consumption and create environmentally responsible societies.

Far more can be done through wiser policies to mitigate environmental damage. But the fact remains that the larger the human population, the greater the stress on the natural world. Mounting scientific evidence shows stress on the natural world from a global population at 6.6 billion (including a U.S. population of 300 million) is approaching the breaking point – or has already moved beyond it.

Despite advances in science and technology, one person in three still lives in severe poverty. There is a long way to go to provide for today's population in environmentally sustainable ways, to say nothing of future generations. Recently, population growth has begun to subside – birth rates are now falling faster than death rates. But the UN projects population growth will subside only slowly, so that the global population will stabilize at over 9 billion people in 2050. That prospect is daunting.

It would be easier to provide for the global population in environmentally sustainable ways if it were smaller. But smaller numbers will be possible only after growth stops and the population stabilizes. Stabilization requires roughly two children on average per family. Fortunately, worldwide evidence now shows there are policies that work to lower birth rates. In many European countries, families now have fewer than two children, so that populations may start to fall. Population declines bring their own challenges but can make it easier – many would say make it possible – to preserve the natural world, alleviate poverty and ensure a good quality of life for all people. The Sierra Club

therefore welcomes non-coercive, culturally sensitive policies that will help lower birth rates, stabilize global population, and make a smaller population a realistic possibility.

Evidence shows that a three-part program works. Those three parts include the following:

- A range of voluntary family planning services and information, so that people can learn about family planning and avoid unwanted pregnancy;
- Basic health care for all; and
- Education, social and economic opportunity and empowerment, especially for women.

Typically, reaching a two-child family requires effort on all three fronts.

Where nations have widely instituted such a program, birth rates have decreased sharply as couples have smaller, healthier, and better-educated families. The problem is that this program has not yet been carried out in enough locations, particularly where poverty persists or tradition profoundly affects women's choices. In contrast, more coercive approaches have generally proved counterproductive, often leading to a backlash against family planning.

Given the grave implications of population growth, the Sierra Club urges greater effort to explain how population pressure is affecting the environment and stronger support for the program – family planning, health care, and education and opportunity for women – that most effectively encourages smaller families.

There is cause for hope. The program described above can improve families' well-being immediately and help bring populations to more sustainable levels, both in the U.S. and globally. With enough effort, world population could stabilize at well under 9 billion and could eventually decrease —solely because of lower birth rates. But humanity cannot afford to rely on hope alone. Global population is already larger than can be sustained over the long term. The situation is urgent and deserves far more attention than it is getting.

There is no time to lose.

II. Sierra Club Support for the ICPD Approach

To address population growth, the Sierra Club urges greater support for the approach ratified by 179 country governments and thousands of nongovernmental organizations from around the world, including the Sierra Club, at the United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo in 1994. This approach, reaffirmed in 2004, calls for universal access to voluntary family planning, allowing people to decide the number and spacing of their children. The Sierra Club calls for increased support, including funding by both government and the private sector for the full range of ICPD goals. Working toward these goals with partners from around the world, the Sierra Club seeks a sustainable planet where all living beings have a clean, healthy environment.

ICPD GOALS [Quoted]

1. Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger

Smaller families and wider birth intervals allow families to invest more in each child's nutrition and health, and can reduce poverty and hunger for all members of a household. At the national level, fertility reduction may enable accelerated social and economic development. Smaller families allow women to engage in more income-producing activities.

2. Achieve Universal Primary Education

Families with fewer children, and children spaced further apart, can afford to invest more in each child's education. This has a special benefit for girls, whose education may have a lower priority for families than that of boys. Preventing early pregnancy can help keep adolescent girls in school who may otherwise be forced to leave.

3. Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women

Controlling whether and when to have children is a critical aspect of women's empowerment. Women who can plan the timing and number of their births also have greater opportunities for work, education, and social participation outside the home.

4. Reduce Child Mortality

Prenatal care and the ability to avoid high-risk pregnancies (e.g., those to very young women and those spaced closely together) help prevent infant and child deaths. Children in large families are likely to have reduced health care, and unwanted children are more likely to die than wanted ones. They are also more likely to be deprived of nutrition and attention.

5. Improve Maternal Health

Preventing unplanned and high-risk pregnancies and providing care in pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period save women's lives.

6. Combat HIV/AIDS and other Diseases

Sexual and reproductive health care includes preventing and treating sexually transmitted infections, including HIV/AIDS. In addition, reproductive health care can bring clients into the health care system, encouraging diagnosis and treatment of other diseases and conditions.

7. Ensure Environmental Sustainability

Providing sexual and reproductive health services, and avoiding unwanted births, may help stabilize rural areas, slow urban migration, enhance women's role as resource managers and balance natural resource use with the needs of the population.”

III. Other Issues

Beyond the ICPD goals, the Sierra Club is a pro-choice organization that has worked for population stabilization since 1965. Action by individuals, families, and governments is

necessary to achieve population stabilization at sustainable levels. We endorse and work for comprehensive, voluntary reproductive health care for all. We encourage wider opportunity for women as well as men, particularly education. We help to educate people on the linkages between population growth and environmental stress. We advocate stronger policies and support increased domestic and international funding to meet these goals. Reflecting the vote of its membership, the Sierra Club takes no position on immigration levels or on policies governing immigration into the United States. We address the root causes of migration by promoting environmentally sustainable development strategies that keep families and environments healthy, as well as improved maternal and child health care, improved labor and environmental standards in all trade agreements, and the education and empowerment of women.

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