

Opinion & Analysis

Planet is buckling under weight of people



**JOHN
GIBBONS**

We must break the useless taboo about controlling our global population explosion

DAVID ATTENBOROUGH is the world's best-known natural history filmmaker. For decades his BBC documentaries have defined nature programming. However, Attenborough has also been heavily criticised for turning a blind eye to environmental disasters as his film crews scouted ever more remote locations in search of the rapidly vanishing pristine "natural world" so beloved of television audiences.

Any fool can stick to his guns, even as the facts change. It takes a brave man to admit when he's wrong, and Attenborough is such an individual. In 2006, approaching the age of 80, he got off the fence and produced a powerful documentary series entitled *Are We Changing Planet Earth?*

Earlier this year, Attenborough became patron of the Optimum Population Trust (OPT), a controversial British think tank. Behind every threat to the natural world, he says, is "the frightening explosion in human numbers . . . I've never seen a problem that wouldn't be easier to solve with fewer people, or harder – and ultimately impossible – with more."

Anyone who has dared venture into the public domain to discuss population issues can expect to be pilloried by all sides. On a recent discussion on Newstalk, I was instantly labelled a "Malthusian misanthrope" by another guest. My crime? Daring to suggest that, yes, population is an issue, and no, the world cannot sustain an infinite number of people. And in the brisk online discussion that

followed last week's column, the lowest *ad hominen* insult one contributor could think of was I "advocate reproduction control and am one of the main dangers to your liberty". Quite.

"For far too long, governments and environmental NGOs have observed a taboo – invented in the 1980s by a bizarre coalition of the religious right and the liberal left – on stating this obvious fact: that total human impact is the average per person multiplied by the total number of us," said Attenborough.

There are two ways for human numbers to achieve sustainable levels. The first is the *laissez faire* approach, in which population continues to spiral until nature, via famine, disease and wars, cruelly regulates our numbers. The other route is to support initiatives – including contraception and empowerment for women – to achieve the same result. For humanity to continue on its current path without expecting the severest of consequences is, says Attenborough, a silent lie: "This absurd taboo betrays our children."

Earlier this month, the UN's Population Fund (UNFPA) marked World Population Day by stating "an investment in contraceptive services can be recouped at least four times over by reducing the need for public spending on health, education and other social services". Given genuine choice, women the world over opt for later marriage and fewer children. Ironically, the 80 million or so unplanned births each year is almost identical to the global rate of population increase. The UNFPA also estimates that family planning

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alone would reduce maternal deaths by 40 per cent.

Coercion, as in China's one-child policy (partially eased this week) is always undesirable. Oddly, less attention is paid to equally heinous pro-fertility coercion, as in Ceausescu's Romania or Iran after the 1979 Islamic revolution. In both cases, the result was widespread poverty and child abandonment, and in Romania, pitiful orphanages and an Aids epidemic. Iran disgracefully reduced the legal marriage age for girls to 13 and dismantled family planning programmes. Today, with nearly 40 million Iranians facing water shortages, the ban on contraception has been aggressively reversed.

While birth rates globally are falling, the UN projects that world population will swell to 9.1 billion by 2050. Today's population is 6.8 billion and already international agencies are pessimistic about maintaining adequate food, safe fresh water and other critical

resources for this number. Now, try adding another 2.3 billion mouths to feed into a stressed ecosystem where agricultural productivity is static or declining and, barring further disastrous forest clearances, there is no new land to put under the plough.

Growing population is naturally accompanied by rising expectations; tens of millions in China, India and elsewhere are moving into the middle classes. To keep pace with both population and increasing meat consumption "agriculture needs to double its food production, using less water than today", according to the UK's chief scientific adviser.

Just a few generations ago, Ireland experienced a devastating famine. British misrule undoubtedly increased the misery, but it was, at heart, a classic Malthusian disaster. In 1695, our total population was about one million. When blight struck in 1845, population had increased almost eightfold.

This unsustainable trajectory was enabled by the arrival of an alien crop (the potato) that allowed impossible levels of growth to occur until crops failed. Without the escape valve of emigration, our death toll would have been far worse. Fossil fuels are today's global equivalent of the Irish potato, powering the "Green Revolution" of food production and allowing world population to continue its straight-line ascent to oblivion. A year ago, I quoted Paul Ehrlich (author of *The Population Bomb*): "whatever your cause, it is lost unless you limit population growth". Today, we are 78 million steps closer to the edge.