

## 3:1 Introducing the Great Population/Environment Debate

**M**any people believe that overpopulation is the primary cause of environmental destruction. However, the relationship between people and their environment, and the role that population growth plays in environmental degradation, is a lot more complicated and a lot more controversial than this simple ‘too many people = environmental destruction’ formula. In fact, as you will see from the quotes that follow, there is very little agreement about the nature of the relationship between population growth and the environment:

- *No one wants a world of standing-room only, where every bit of land, drop of water, and unit of energy is pressed into producing sustenance for an endlessly expanding human mass... [but] many environmentally harmful processes have less to do with population growth than with specific consumption patterns, land uses, and agricultural technologies.*<sup>1</sup>

— Betsy Hartmann, *Reproductive Rights and Wrongs*



- *Population growth is ‘the fundamental environmental issue’ and population control is ‘the most promising field of action.’*<sup>2</sup>

— Joint statement of the US National Academy of Sciences and the Royal Society of London, 1992

- *If every military-blighted site around the world were marked on a map with red tacks, the earth would look as though it had a bad case of the measles.*<sup>3</sup>

— Joni Seager, “Patriarchal Vandalism”

- *As population growth is slowing, consumption growth is emerging as the dominant factor increasing our pressure on the environment.*<sup>4</sup>

— Paul Harrison and Fred Pearce, *AAAS Atlas of Population and Environment*

- *Properly chosen production technologies can improve both economic development and environmental quality.*<sup>5</sup>

— Barry Commoner, “Rapid Population Growth and Environmental Stress”



### Think Spot

- In your own words, state what each person/organization quoted above believes about the population/environment relationship. What’s most important to them?
- Using only the above quotes, identify some of the factors that play a role in the relationship between population and the environment.

## Why All The Disagreement?

There are many reasons for all the disagreement about the relationship between people and the environment and for why this relationship remains so poorly understood. Research into the links between population and the environment is relatively new and controversial and the links between population and the environment are often misrepresented.<sup>6</sup> Misrepresentation of population/environment links can occur when, for example, population trends are simply listed side by side with environmental trends, on the assumption that one is the direct cause of the other.<sup>7</sup> Equally important:

*The subject [of population and the environment] is complex and demands a broad and deep knowledge of demography, economics, and social and environmental science, which few possess. Family planning and environmental politics are contentious areas, and personal views on these often color scientific research and theories.<sup>8</sup>*

— Paul Harrison and Fred Pearce, *AAAS Atlas of Population and Environment*

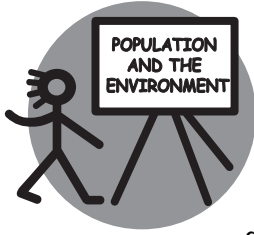
## What Do Different People Say about the Relationship between Population and the Environment?

As you read earlier, many people believe that overpopulation is responsible for destroying the environment. Some of them say that continued **population growth** will exhaust the planet's resources. They talk about reaching the limits of the earth's capacity to sustain human activities and have even developed an equation that is intended to measure the impact of population on the environment. Others say that **inefficient technology** and rapid **industrialization** are the main enemies of the environment. Still others believe that technological advances, when taken together with reduced consumption, more equitable distribution of resources, and shifts in values, can actually help prevent environmental disaster. Many people assert that the greatest threat to the environment is not the number of people but rather the **nature of human/environment interactions**.<sup>9</sup> In other words, similar numbers of people can have very different impacts on the environment, depending on, for example, **consumption levels**, land and property ownership, and means of production (e.g., equitable and conserving versus inequitable and wasteful). **Socio-economic factors** such as access to education, healthcare and sustainable livelihoods, as well as gender roles and relations, including women's education levels, political involvement and decision-making at all levels also play an important role.<sup>10</sup> People who focus on these socio-economic factors often believe that the underlying reasons for environmentally harmful practices lie not in the number or rate of people being born, but in the complex **processes** that have led to the poor **becoming, being and staying poor** (and becoming poorer) and the rich becoming richer and more powerful.<sup>11</sup>



### Quick Check

In note form, list some of the key issues in the population/environment debate outlined in the last paragraph.



## Teaching Ideas: Section 3

### PRE-READING ACTIVITIES

**Environment Collage:** Spend a few minutes brainstorming about environmental degradation – what does it look like, what forms does it take, what/who causes it, what are its consequences. Let students know that before embarking on the readings in this unit, they will explore the issue of environmental degradation in a visual form – the collage (explain if necessary). Have students look for and cut out pictures related to the issue, gluing them together to create their collage. Take time for the class to examine the collage. Ask students if they have any questions for each other about the selection and incorporation of particular pictures/images (justification). Discuss the various aspects of the issues that emerge using the following question prompts:

- What do you see? (Elicit different perspectives). What other ways of looking at this environmental collage are there?
- Identify the different kinds of global environmental problems depicted by the collage.
- What kind of environment does the collage depict? What kind of future does it show?
- What does the collage show that an individual picture would not? How does it clarify or confuse specific environmental problems?
- What/who does the collage not show (invisible aspects of environmental degradation; particular people/groups/industries)?
- How are people represented in the collage? Which people/groups of people are shown? If there are few people depicted in the collage, why do you think this is so?
- What is the metaphorical effect of the jagged borders/broken edges of the collage?

Follow-Up: Ask students to write a paragraph summarizing their thoughts about what the collage says about the relationship between people and the environment. Between population growth and the environment?

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### 3:1 INTRODUCING THE GREAT POPULATION/ ENVIRONMENT DEBATE (PAGE 114)

**Responding To Quotations:** The first reading in this unit contains a number of quotations to spark student interest and introduce different ways of thinking about population and the environment. Ask students to select one of the quotations from “Introducing the Great Population/Environment Debate” and take a moment to think about the reasons they chose the statement they did. After students have read over their chosen quotations a couple of times, have them write down three reactions to/about it. Then, ask them to find someone who chose the same quotation as they did and discuss their reactions together. Encourage students to look for ways in which their reactions are similar/different and to consider the factors that could account for these similarities/differences. To close, ask students to take a few minutes to reflect in writing on how the ‘who’ of who they are (their social and cultural identities) and the ‘where’ of where they live affects their reactions.