

# Raising Issues

*In the first article of a new feature Rosie raises questions about limiting population growth and invites your responses.*

## Questions about population growth

As of January 2019, there were approximately 7.7 billion human beings living on this planet. In the time it takes you to read this article, over 2000 babies will have been born, each one a new life that requires care, nurture, sustenance and, crucially, resources. While the birth rate continues to be higher in less economically developed parts of the world (Hall, 2015), it is babies born in wealthier countries who will consume more of Earth's resources during the course of their lifetime (Cripps, 2017). Within both geographical and wider discourse, there have long been calls for those in the high-consumption 'West' to 'curb their extravagant lifestyles and consume less' (Hall, 2015, p. 41; see also Nehring, 2009; Smil, 2011). However, the reality is that few would choose to do so. Indeed, the suggestion defies the goals of neoliberal economic development and, particularly when levelled at those in the rapidly emerging economies, smacks of Western hypocrisy.

However, exposés of the impact of human activity on the natural world, such as the BBC's *Blue Planet* series, have encouraged us to take more individual responsibility for our choices and actions. There has been widespread media coverage of our desire to reduce our use of plastics, increase the amount we recycle and limit, or even eliminate, our consumption of animal products. These are relatively easy choices that have little real impact on our everyday lives and seemingly tick the box for 'playing our part'. However, I argue that what is missing from both mainstream public discourse and, crucially, the way in which we teach children about human impacts on the planet is the role that individual reproduction plays in the pressure on resources (Manning, 2016).

Reproduction is assumed and expected in capitalist societies (Russell, 1994), whereby ever-increasing numbers of consumers are required

**Figure 1:** Shoppers in the Rue Sainte Catherine, Bordeaux, August 2018. **Photo:** © Mike Dotta/Shutterstock.com.



in order to achieve ever-increasing levels of economic growth. However, the impact of each new life on the planet's natural resources is undeniable. In 2008 the UK Environment Agency calculated that the average child uses 146.5kg of nappies during the first two-and-a-half years of their life, the majority of which are buried in landfill. Moreover, recent research by Lund University in Sweden argues that parents increase their annual carbon emissions by 58.6 tons for every child born (Wynes and Nicholas, 2017, p. 1). And yet suggesting that individuals limit the number of the children they have, whether to the replacement level of two or indeed to one or none, is still widely considered to be an unwarranted invasion of privacy and a denial of people's right to choose.

However, in the light of the growing global population and the increasing pressure on the planet's resources, I argue that reproduction is not simply a personal choice. How many children you have has an impact far beyond your personal circumstances. It is not simply the case that if you can afford to raise children then you should have them, largely due to the ecological impact each of those children will have throughout the course of their lives, but also because they are not only the financial responsibility of their parents. The state (i.e. the taxpayer) supports each new life through maternity services, hospitals and schools and, at the end of their lives, through care of the elderly. As Manning (2016, p. 23) argues, the state 'effectively underwrites every such decision'. I would argue that the planet does, too.

Encouraging children to engage thoughtfully and critically with the world around them is fundamental to geography education (Walshe, 2010). Whilst opinions differ on the extent to which children should be asked to consider themselves as 'activists' in global concerns (Standish, 2008; 2012), there should be a recognition that knowledge lends us not only power, but responsibility that goes beyond token gestures of environmental friendliness.

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It is crucial that we empower children to be responsible global citizens and take ownership of their choices, not through fear (which is useless), but through the imparting of a range of views and perspectives from which they can form their own opinions. With increasing levels of ecological degradation and the subsequent impact on wildlife and indeed humans themselves (Knight and Adger, 2015), it is our responsibility as educators to present children with the reality of their own choices. I am not suggesting for a moment that anyone be forced or coerced with regards to their reproduction; instead I am arguing that the wider impact of a seemingly purely personal choice be presented to children so that they can make more informed and considered decisions in their adult lives. As geographers and educators, we have a responsibility to hold in balance the rights of human beings and the natural world; we do our discipline, our students and most importantly our planet a disservice by failing to acknowledge the tensions between the two.

## Questions for discussion

1. Do you think that global population growth is an 'issue'? Why?
2. Is reproduction an individual choice?
3. What factors might affect rates of reproduction in different parts of the world?
4. Should environmental concerns be the responsibility of individuals, businesses or governments? | **TG**

## Feedback

If you have any comments or views that you would like to share on this article please email Elaine Anderson at the GA ([eanderson@geography.org.uk](mailto:eanderson@geography.org.uk)) and we will aim to include a number of them in the next issue of *Teaching Geography*.

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