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Dear Fellow Citizen:

Leave it to *National Geographic* to make a guy feel really old. In its January issue with a cover story about world population reaching 7 billion later this year, it was pointed out that before the 20<sup>th</sup> century no humans had lived through a doubling of population. "But there are people alive today who have seen it triple," the article said. That's me, born in 1931 when world population stood at about 2 billion.

I've been writing about population and environmental issues for two decades. So I was active in calling attention to the last 1 billion increase in population – in July 1999. It's unlikely that I will be alive to mark the addition of the next billion in 2030. Demographers project world population to reach 9.3 billion in 2050, when my temporary triumph over the actuarial tables will have definitely expired.

The sheer scale of the population explosion over the last century ought to give us pause. It has been accomplished despite two sanguinary world wars, purges and famines under Stalin and Mao that carried off tens of millions, various world pandemics, civil wars and genocides, and assorted natural calamities. We keep reproducing at a phenomenal rate. Birthrates may be declining, but population momentum keeps pushing the numbers relentlessly higher. Watch TV news and note the preponderance of young people in the riotous crowds, and toddlers among starving refugees, in poor nations. These are people who will be forming the families of the future.

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Populations tend to grow exponentially. Exponential growth is characterized by doubling, and a few doublings can lead to lead quickly to enormous numbers. We are now witnessing the consequences of this implacable arithmetic. As population outraces resources, we face a near-term future of "peak oil," food shortages and civil disorder. Population Action International three years ago issued a prescient warning. It was no coincidence, it suggested, that 80 percent of the civil conflicts that broke out in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s occurred in countries (Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, the Congo, etc.) where at least 60 percent of the population was under 30. The Population Reference Bureau released a study about the same time that described the "youth bulge" in the Middle East and North Africa, where one in five people was between the ages of 15 and 24. In Nigeria, 75 percent of the population was under 30, the report said. Small wonder, then, that this year's explosion of revolt in these regions is being led by restive, jobless young people.

Those who debunk the very idea of overpopulation have a variety of explanations for their optimism. These range from Biblical injunctions about filling the earth to expectations that technology will overcome. They believe that better educational achievements for women will lead to lower birthrates. The naysayers also think world population will top out at 11 billion or 14 billion, or something "manageable." But Garrett Hardin, a biologist and environmentalist, once put a wry twist on such views. "He who says 'the Earth can support still more people' is always right," Hardin said, "for, until we reach absolute rock bottom, we can always lower the standard of living another notch and support a larger population."

Even assuming, as the song goes, that the future's not ours to see, what can we make of what we know today about the impact of population on our planet? Scientists (but not politicians) have reached a consensus that carbon emissions from human activity are contributing to climate change. Our growing numbers threaten to undermine whatever steps we take to limit further damage to ecosystems. Pollution of air, water and oceans combine with deforestation and degradation of natural resources such as underground water to imperil the well-being of future generations.

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Those who have faith in science and technology to keep up with human numbers will be tested this year by the world's ability to produce enough affordable food for 7 billion hungry mouths. Droughts and floods severely impacted crop production last year, so the harvests of 2011 have become crucial. According to the International Monetary Fund, global food prices were up 61 percent from their most recent low in 2008. The IMF economists found a significant relationship between food prices and political unrest in low-income countries between 1970 and 2007 – no surprise to those who have been following the Middle East and North African news. (Food budgets account for nearly 40 percent of Egyptian household spending.)

In March, a senior Chinese agricultural official said that China may not be able to meet sharply rising food demand from its domestic resources, indicating further need for imports. Lester R. Brown of the Earth Policy Institute recently wrote that, "The world is now one poor harvest away from chaos in world grain markets," adding that a poor harvest will cause food prices to rise "to previously unimaginable levels; food riots will multiply, political unrest will spread and governments will fall."

Apocalyptic predictions generally turn out to be wrong. But it is worth noting that, even before the undersized harvests last year, 27 countries were on apparently permanent international food welfare. Most of these recipients are poor countries with runaway population growth. Lester Brown puts the matter in understandable terms: "There will be 219,000 people at the dinner table tonight who were not there last night." Changing the growth bias that controls population policies in most countries will require not only stronger family planning policies but a major change in mind set. The dictators and authoritarian rulers who dominate much of the developing world equate big populations with power and control.

A recent United Nations report says that to have a reasonable chance of stabilizing world population, fertility in most developing countries must drop to below replacement level, 2.1 children per couple, and it must be maintained at that level for "an extended period." For a Panglossian view of mankind's prospects, turn to *The Economist* ("A Prospect of Plenty," Feb. 20), which confidently predicts that "by 2050 the world's population will have slowed almost to zero," with enough food for everyone. Another triumph of hope over experience, as I see it, but a convenient forecast for global businesses wanting ever more consumers.

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