

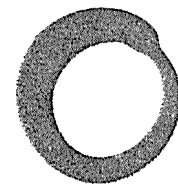
Population, Immigration & Environment

The current debate about asylum seekers has served to polarise Australian society and has renewed discussion about what may constitute a long term sustainable human population for Australia.

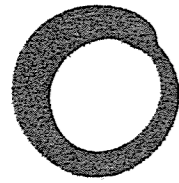
Concern for the environment has often been used as an argument to limit or even reduce immigration, and some within the environment movement have argued for lower population levels in order to minimise environmental impacts.

This paper is part of Friends of the Earth's Environment and Population project and explores some of the key issues in this debate from an international social justice perspective.

February 2002



**Friends of
the Earth
Australia**



Friends of the Earth recognises that existing land use patterns, and resource extraction, production and consumption (including greenhouse gas emissions) are the most significant drivers of environmental deterioration in Australia.

The sustainable population debate must start with an assessment of our current ecological footprint. We need to acknowledge that we are over-consuming and develop a serious and strategic plan for reduction of ecological impacts, regardless of final population levels.

This debate needs to occur with full recognition of:

- * the responsibilities that come with being the highest per capita producer of greenhouse gases of any nation on the planet,
- * the need to address the rising numbers of environmental refugees,
- * and international perspectives that involve global equity in terms of access to resources.

In this debate, FoEA acknowledges on-going sovereignty of Australia by Indigenous peoples and the need to fully involve Indigenous communities in developing a common vision about what would constitute an optimum population for long term sustainability

Population growth, while a factor in environmental impact, should not be considered in isolation of these other issues. It is inappropriate to single out immigrants as a potential source of environmental degradation. As Australians, we need to get our own 'house in order' and not seek to blame others for our ecological problems.

We understand that Australia, as a nation, is part of a globalised world, with corresponding responsibilities. The current management regimes for asylum seekers are no less than shameful, and impact directly on Australia's international reputation. We call on the federal government to immediately end its policy of mandatory detention of asylum seekers, and to move to community-based systems for hosting asylum seekers. (see: www.foe.org.au for full policy)

Resource consumption

Australia has the highest per capita greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions on the planet at about 26.7 tonnes per person per year. This is twice the average level of other wealthy countries (13.4 tonnes) and 25% higher than emissions per person in the United States (21.2 tonnes).

A sustainable and equitable level of GHG emission is 1.5 tonnes per person per year. Australia's 19 million people collectively use 18 times more of the atmosphere than we are entitled to (1).

This means that Australia, like all Northern countries, owes a carbon debt to the rest of the world for overuse of the global commons (oceans, atmosphere and other systems which offset greenhouse gas emissions). The challenge beyond ratifying the Kyoto Protocol is to achieve sustainable and equitable per capita based greenhouse gas emission targets. This will require emission reductions up to 20 times those of the Kyoto Protocol for high polluters (contraction) while allowing limited emissions growth in countries lacking carbon debts (convergence).

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Beyond greenhouse gases, there is also another aspect of global responsibility, which relates to overall resource consumption. Australia is part of the First World or North. These countries - Western Europe, North America, Japan, Australia and New Zealand, comprise around 23% of the world's human population, yet use around 80% of the resources which are consumed.

Consumption patterns in the North are neither sustainable nor ethical

Research indicates that if everyone currently living on the planet were to live at the average consumption levels of those in the First World, we would need to put all arable land into

agricultural production. However, we would also need another two planets of the same size as the earth to meet everyone's needs.

Clearly, consumption patterns in the North are neither sustainable nor ethical since they are not a viable option for all people currently living on the planet.

Yet discussion about 'population' usually avoids this issue, focusing as it does on numbers of people rather than per capita resource consumption. Even Paul Erhlich, the population theorist, identified that environmental impact is a product of population multiplied by consumption. In terms of overall impact, it can be argued that the average Australian has more than five times the impact of the average Indonesian based on consumption levels (2). Any strategy aimed at providing long term sustainable settlement in Australia need to rely on reducing per capita and national consumption levels to globally equitable levels, rather than focusing on simplistic proposals to limit immigration.

Population growth

We recognise the need to continue to accept asylum seekers without reducing current quotas for economic migrants. We also recognise that Australia has a responsibility to accept environmental refugees, especially those displaced by climate change in the Asia-Pacific region. This is not an argument for simple population 'boosterism'; it is based on solidarity and human rights perspectives rather than a desire to increase population in the hope of stimulating the economy.

Who is behind calls for increased population levels?

Sociological researcher, Sheila Newman, notes: "Many people believe that Australia takes immigrants mainly for humanitarian reasons. This is only true these days in the case of refugees. Rather, most immigration is justified on economic grounds based on the desire to create a larger local market and to stimulate inflation. Thus business organisations are the main drivers of immigration, constantly lobbying government to enlarge the formal immigration intake."

The most active of these organisations seem to be in the areas of property development and housing, such as the Housing Industry Association and the Urban Development Institute of Australia. The Australian Population Institute (APop) is also an outspoken advocate of higher immigration. While it claims to have no political or other mission objective other than to "represent the views of the many Australians that support responsible population growth", the committee nevertheless has very close connections with property development. Apop president Albert Dennis, for instance, is Chairman of the Dennis Family Corporation which is reputed to be Victoria's largest private land developer, with considerable land holdings in Melbourne and Brisbane. Other business organisations, the upstream and downstream industries to housing and infrastructure industries, are also involved in advocating population growth through higher immigration levels." (3)

This type of self interest should be exposed for what it is rather than as being manifestations of good will or international responsibility.

Conclusions and recommendations

The Australian environment is under serious, on-going and cumulative threat from various sources, including land use, resource extraction, population growth, production patterns and infrastructure trends.

Asylum seekers and migrants are not to blame for these problems.

Any debate about what may constitute a 'Sustainable population' is meaningless unless it considers per capita consumption and national extraction rates. Australia is clearly overconsuming and possibly under-populated in global fair-share terms.

Australia's treatment of asylum seekers must urgently be altered to respect their human rights.

Australia's policy on immigration should reflect its global responsibilities in terms of ecological debt, trade policy and commitment to tolerant democracy rather than a product of a spurious application of an environmental analysis.

In the short term, the Australian government and community need to acknowledge that:

- 1. There are large (and growing) numbers of environmental refugees.**
- 2. They result from genuine ecological disruption.**
- 3. The North bears a significant responsibility for this.**
- 4. Therefore, the North must make reparations, make room, and change policies that contribute to the creation of refugees.**
- 5. Environmental refugees are currently not recognised under UN structures.**
- 6. We need to advocate for UN recognition of environmental refugees and make such recognition unilaterally.**

References and further information

The FoE Australia environment and population project can be viewed at www.foe.org.au
Issues of consumption are covered by many resources created by FoE groups. See for example, *Sharing the World; Sustainable Living & Global Equity in the 21st Century*, M Carley & P Spapens, Earthscan, 1998.

- (1) Friends of the Earth analysis of emissions data (www.unfccc.de) and emission scenarios (www.ipcc.ch)
- (2) Working on estimates of ecological footprints provided by Redefining Progress. Eco footprint (expressed as hectares per capita): Australia = 8.5 ha, Indonesia = 1.5 ha.
- (3) Article by Sheila Newman. All the information cited was available from Apop on 20/7/2001. Additional information about business interests was obtained from the *Business Who's Who of Australia*, Dun and Bradstreet Marketing P/L, 35th Edition, 2001.



Friends of the Earth Australia

Friends of the Earth Australia is the national member of FoE International, which is active in 66 countries. It is working for a socially equitable and ecologically sustainable future. Its national campaigns include nuclear issues, trade, population and environment, climate change and ecological debt.

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