

# Opinion: Sadly, Malthus was right. Now what?



*MADLINE WELD, SPECIAL TO MONTREAL GAZETTE*

[More from Madeline Weld, Special to Montreal Gazette](#)

([HTTP://MONTREALGAZETTE.COM/AUTHOR/MADLINE-WELD-SPECIAL-TO-MONTREAL-GAZETTE](http://montrealgazette.com/author/madeline-weld-special-to-montreal-gazette))

Published on: February 14, 2016 | Last Updated: February 14, 2016 1:00 PM EST



Thomas Robert Malthus wrote, in this *Essay on the Principle of Population* that, if left unchecked, human population growth would encounter limits. *MONTREAL GAZETTE FILES*

Saturday marked the 250th anniversary of the birth of Thomas Robert Malthus. I would like to wish him many happy returns.

And he does keep on returning, doesn't he, despite those who say he is wrong or passé.

His Essay on the Principle of Population argued that, if left unchecked, human population growth would encounter limits: "The power of population is indefinitely greater than the power in the Earth to produce subsistence for man." He foresaw famine, disease and much suffering, especially among the poorest. But in addition to these "negative checks," he also recognized "preventive checks" like limiting birthrates and later marriage. As a cleric, he advocated "the chaste postponement of marriage."

Some 218 years after the first edition of his controversial treatise was published, we are still arguing about it. In 1798, the world population was under one billion. Now it's 7.4 billion and counting. For the last 40 years, it's been increasing by one billion every 12 to 13 years.

Some people say that's no problem, that we're better off than ever. The Green Revolution staved off the starvation in India predicted by Paul Ehrlich in *The Population Bomb*. Advances in agriculture, medicine and other technology have made us richer and healthier. The late Julian Simon even said that ever more people is a good thing, since humans are "the ultimate resource" and every mouth to feed comes with a pair of hands to work and a brain to solve problems. What could go wrong?

But things are going seriously wrong. To provision our ever-growing population, we are, in Ehrlich's words, turning the planet into a "feedlot for humanity." We have taken over about one-third of its land surface and scoured its oceans, wiping out several major fisheries and depleting the rest. Our "solution" of farmed fish creates other problems. High-yield Green Revolution crops require pesticides, fertilizer and water; the first two are becoming more expensive, the last scarcer in many areas.

Homo sapiens' appetite is gargantuan. As we strive to get at dwindling resources for ever more people, we dig deeper into the Earth, blow the tops of mountains, divert rivers, cut down forests and pave over swaths of land. We fill the land, water, and air with our pollution. We're driving record numbers of species to extinction and decimating others with activities from chemical poisoning to hunting for bushmeat, or simply by taking over their habitat.

Greenhouse gases from our industry are changing the Earth's climate, with such dangerous consequences as ocean acidification, rising sea levels and flooding, changes in rainfall patterns including in vital "breadbaskets," and loss of forest cover.

While the word "sustainable" has become popular, growing human numbers and activities are anything but. Increasing awareness of our impact has led to developments in renewable energy, recycling, earth-friendly farming and more. There have also been spectacular advances in family planning. But powerful —notably religious — opposition has kept governments and international bodies from actively promoting small families and prevented hundreds of millions of women who would plan their families from having access to modern methods.

Those who deny that overpopulation is a problem say the poor don't consume much. Yet the poor want nothing more than to consume more, as proved by India and China. Who can blame them? And a burgeoning number of desperately poor people does have a major impact: they cut down forests to grow food, drain rivers, deplete aquifers, and overfish and over-hunt in their local area. But make these points and you'll be accused of blaming the poor for the problems of the rich.

We seem bound to learn the hard way that there really is a limit to how many people the Earth can support.

We wish it weren't so, but it really is starting to look as if Malthus was right.

Madeline Weld is president of [Population Institute Canada](#)