



For a sustainable future

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Rt Hon Michael Gove MP
Secretary of State for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs

12 March 2019, via email

Dear Mr Gove

Population Matters is a campaigning charity working to achieve a sustainable global population to protect the natural environment and improve people's lives. We are contacting you today in regard to the WEOG consultation meeting on the Convention on Biodiversity due to take place later this month. We urge the UK government to use its influence to ensure that the post-2020 targets and mechanisms of the Convention address the impact of unsustainable human population.

While there are many reasons that many of the existing Aichi Targets may be missed, failure to address human population growth is certainly among them. Since 1970, according to WWF (*Living Planet Report*, 2018), populations of vertebrate wildlife have declined by 60% - in the same period, the global population has doubled. Those extra four billion people have each required land, food (and the land it is produced on), water, energy, infrastructure and finite and renewable resources. They have also contributed to the climate change that is driving some animals and plants from their habitats, killing them in extreme weather events, and acidifying the oceans. Plastic pollution and eutrophication of waterways through fertiliser use are among the multiple other problems exacerbated by unsustainable population growth.

Multiple scientific papers have recently identified population growth as a factor in biodiversity loss (see notes). The Sixth Mass Extinction is an irreversible environmental catastrophe which, if not arrested, will inevitably bring profound harm to human beings through its decimation of ecosystem resources on which we are wholly dependent. Ignoring the fundamental contribution of human population growth to this crisis is untenable and irresponsible. Human population growth can be ended and reversed through actions which also improve people's lives in multiple other ways: lifting them out of poverty, providing high quality education, empowering women, and ensuring everyone can access and freely use high quality family planning services all reduce family size and population growth. Schemes taking this approach have also proven successful at local level in protecting biodiversity (see notes). These actions speed up progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals.

It is therefore imperative that the post-2020 CBD framework includes mechanisms to ethically and sustainably ensure rapid progress towards local and global human population levels that are sustainable and compatible with its goals. I urge you to ensure that measures to reduce human population growth are included in discussions, and to press for their inclusion in the final agreement. We would welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues and approaches to addressing them with you or members of your team.

Yours sincerely

Robin Maynard, Director



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Notes

The World Scientists Warning to Humanity: Second Notice, published in *Bioscience* in 2017 has now been endorsed by more than 20,000 scientists. It details decline in almost every marker of environmental resilience, and warns of “catastrophic biodiversity loss”. The paper identifies “**continued rapid population growth as a primary driver behind many ecological and even societal threats**”. The warning calls for changes in public policy and individual behaviours, including “limiting our own reproduction”. It lists 13 policy measures essential to safeguarding our future, including the provision of family planning and girls’ education to reduce fertility and “estimating a scientifically defensible, sustainable human population size for the long term while rallying nations and leaders to support that vital goal.”

Ripple et al. and signatories from 180 countries (2017) World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice, *Bioscience* <https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/article/67/12/1026/4605229>

Research published in the July 2017 *Proceedings of the US National Academy of Sciences* reviewed data on 27,600 terrestrial vertebrate species, with a more detailed analysis of 177 mammal species. It concluded that “**the ultimate drivers of those immediate causes of biotic destruction, namely, human overpopulation and continued population growth, and overconsumption, especially by the rich.**”

Gerardo Ceballos, Paul R. Ehrlich, and Rodolfo Dirzo (2017) *Biological annihilation via the ongoing sixth mass extinction signalled by vertebrate population losses and declines*, from:
<https://www.pnas.org/content/114/30/E6089>

A study published in *Nature Ecology and Evolution* last week quantified a variety of drivers of biodiversity and ecosystem services losses. It found that “**Economic and population growth have been driving the upward trend of impacts on biodiversity and ecosystem services, despite a reduction of the impacts per unit of GDP.**”

Marques, A. et al. Increasing impacts of land use on biodiversity and carbon sequestration driven by population and economic growth. *Nature Ecology & Evolution*, 2019; DOI: 10.1038/s41559-019-0824-3
<https://natureecocommunity.nature.com/users/208051-alexandra-marques/posts/44740-increasing-impacts-of-land-use-on-biodiversity-and-carbon-sequestration-driven-by-population-and-economic-growth>

The EAT-Lancet Commission report on global food sustainability examines how to feed the human population up until 2050 without causing irreversible damage to the environment. It notes the multiple impacts on biodiversity of food production, including that 80% of extinction threats to mammal and bird species are due to agriculture. The study concluded that a “transformation” of food production and consumption would allow a global population of 10bn to be fed sustainably but that achieving sustainability for a population of over 10bn is “increasingly unlikely”. The United Nations currently projects that global population will reach 10bn in the early part of the second half of this century.

Willett et al (2019) *Food in the Anthropocene: the EAT-Lancet report on healthy diets from sustainable food systems* <https://www.thelancet.com/commissions/EAT>

The [Population Health Environment](#) model recognises the synergies and mutual benefits of improving the conditions of human communities in achieving local conservation goals, including through the provision of family planning services to reduce local human population pressures on biodiversity. Organisations successfully implementing this approach include [Blue Ventures](#) (Madagascar), [Nature Uganda](#) and the [Cheetah Conservation Fund](#) (Namibia).