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A Piece of the Pie

The global human population is growing alarmingly fast; the UN predicts we'll stabilize somewhere between 9 and 14 billion people by 2100. If we live at all, will our lives be rich or poor? I liken this so-called "population problem" to a blueberry pie (gimme a break, they're in season). The pie is only so big; will it go around? Potential solutions to this conundrum fall into three hotly debated categories -- a "bigger pie", "smaller slices", or "fewer forks."

Economists and technophiles advocate a bigger pie. They recognize the world is finite but correctly emphasize that *per capita* food production continues to increase steadily. We'll solve the problem by doing more with less. They're half-right; economically driven increases in per capita production of one resource (e.g., food) undeniably raise the global carrying capacity. However, such advances usually prompt increases in consumption of other resources (e.g., soil fertility) that simultaneously pull down the number of people than can live on the earth in perpetuity. The failure of economic theory to consider the goods and services provided by intact ecosystems (i.e., "natural capital") and the environmental costs of economic transactions borne by society at large (i.e., "externalities") has long been recognized, but efforts to correct this inadequacy have only recently gained momentum. This emerging field of "ecological economics" will be very beneficial, I believe, in alleviating the population problem, and I'm encouraged by its growth, but it won't be nearly enough.

Many environmentalists and technophobes advocate a second solution, one that is too often ignored in first world politics: smaller slices. They correctly emphasize that the earth's ability to support its people depends not only on how many of us there are, but on how much each of us consumes. Because our fertility rates have dropped dramatically, we in developed nations are tempted to focus the need for change outside of our own lives. Yet our high rates of consumption elevate environmental impacts far above those of most developing nations. Until we take more serious measures to curb our own energy consumption, efforts to help developing countries lower their fertility rates will be justifiably perceived as imperialistic [dictatorial?] and, therefore, rendered ineffective.

Perhaps the most obvious, and controversial, solution to the population problem is that advocated by other environmentalists and humanists: fewer forks. They correctly recognize that while the earth may, in theory, support up to 13 billion people, such a population would impoverish the world biologically and spiritually. We will live more fulfilled lives if we can stabilize our population at a smaller number. By lowering our population growth rate, perhaps we can reach an "optimum" carrying capacity that is lower than the "maximum." A battery of evidence indicates that education, access to safe and effective contraception, and economic growth *all* help lower fertility rates, and advances in each one of these facilitates advances in the others -- a "virtuous cycle." It is not coercive population *control* but advances in reproductive *freedom* that, ironically, help lower growth rates and raise standards of living.

All these advocated solutions will help solve the population problem, but they must be pursued concurrently. Debate over which to give the most weight will of course continue, as it should, for the answer is yet unknown. But we must be mindful that in

such arguing we do not lose the recognition that all three approaches are valid and necessary. In short, I advocate a fourth solution to the blueberry pie conundrum: “better manners.” Economists are right, a bigger pie will help. Just as a well-mannered baker makes the most of her flour, a more holistic economy will facilitate advances in efficient production. With efficiency in production must come a more equitable (well-mannered) distribution of food. Feeding the world, in the end, is more a political than technological problem. Smaller slices will also help. Just as the well-mannered guest helps himself to smaller slices, so too should developed nations take efforts to reduce per capita consumption. Humanists are right as well, fewer forks will help. Just as the well-mannered hostess will limit her own guest list, inviting only those she can feed, it is now clear that empowering women reduces birth rates and raises standards of living ethically. Most importantly, all of these efforts will work synergistically to demonstrate that, above all, we are striving to live sustainably on Earth *together*. Instead of bickering over who gets what, complaining about too little, and arguing about what to do about it, well-mannered bakers, hosts, and guests sit down and appreciate both their company and their pie. And that appreciation for the earth and ourselves may ultimately be our greatest strength, for we’ll save only what we love.