



Knight Center

for Environmental Journalism

Population and environment

This is a summary of a panel discussion at the 2008 annual conference of the Society of Environmental Journalists. Panelists Steve Curwood, executive producer of NPR; Robert Engelman of the Worldwatch Institute and freelance writer Tom Horton discussed population growth and climate change.

Population stories are underreported. But there are close to 7 billion people on the planet. And conservative estimates say 9 billion humans will occupy it by 2050.

Such quantity strains water and energy supplies and impacts response to climate change. Talking about population is sensitive. Should we clamp down on population growth to reduce carbon emissions and the threat of climate change?

Background:

- Though most population growth takes place in developing nations, more consumption occurs in countries like the United States. Two U.S. children equal consume as much as 26 children in Brazil.
- The U.S. population is growing. By 2050 expect 400 million people in the country. That growth will strain the freshwater supply.
- U.S. carbon emissions grew 19 percent between 1990 and 2004. Population increased by almost the same percentage during that time.

Reporting hurdles:

- Economic growth is good - if we decrease population growth it will have negative impacts on economy
- Sensitive issue – public might feel that you are suppressing freedoms
- Population seems overwhelming - it is just too hard to solve

Solutions:

- Shift the lens from “growth is good” to “who says growth is good?”
- Population growth declines when there is economic security; do not need to have children to provide for you when you get old
- Also declines when women have freedom and access to education

Story Ideas:

- Migration of large populations due to sea-level rise, in developing nations but also in places like Florida
- With cap and trade system, the U.S. will have to shrink carbon per capita with continued population growth
- Ways in which to reduce population growth – want volunteerism and partnerships but also need deadlines, goals

(Reported by Matt Cimitile, Knight Center for Environmental Journalism)