When Population Growth Comes Home to Roost

You only have to look in your own back yard to see the price of rapid population growth overseas.

Neo-tropical bird species are in decline over vast portions of the United States, while the last days of the Monarch butterfly may be upon us.

Scientists say habitat destruction, caused by rapid human population growth due to lack of access to family planning services in the developing world, is largely to blame.

Canary in the Coal Mine

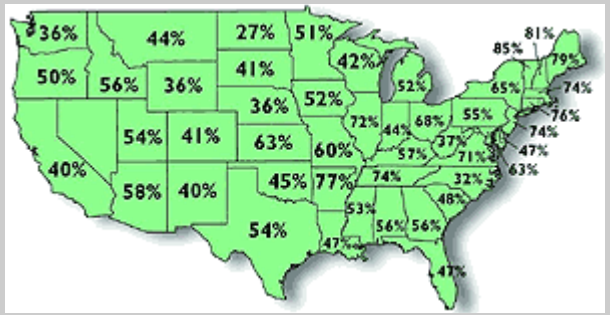
For millennia, birds have served as one of our most important early-warning systems. Birds have helped predict the change of seasons, the coming of storms, the presence of land at sea, and the rise of toxic levels of pollution in the food chain. Now birds are telling us that something is wrong in the environment.

Between 50 and 70 percent of neo-tropical migrant species monitored in eastern and prairie states have been in decline for the last 30 years.

Scientists think that the decline of these neo-tropical songbirds is due, in large part, to habitat destruction caused by rapid rates of population growth both overseas and in the U.S.

Many songbirds spend four to six months a year in Latin America and the Caribbean in tropical forests. However, the forests that many of these birds are dependent upon are being cut to the ground at record rates in order to cope with rapid population growth. In Central America, for example, where population doubles every 25-30 years, over 80 percent of the original forest canopy is gone. The result: fewer and fewer bird species, like the cerulean, Kentucky and prothonotary warblers, are returning to the U.S. every year.

"Human population growth is the most pressing environmental problem facing the U.S. and the world." - John Flicker, President, National Audubon Society



Declines in neo-tropical migratory bird populations are widespread. Numbers on the map represent the percentages of neo-tropical migratory bird species with population declines in individual states over a 10-year period.

Mexico and Monarchs

The migration of Monarch butterflies pre-dates human existence in the western hemisphere. For thousands of years, millions of Monarch butterflies from the United States and Canada

east of the Rocky Mountains migrate up to 3,000 miles to winter in a small forest area in central Mexico.

Now, however, the last days of the Monarch may be in sight. The reason: rapid deforestation of Mexico's high-altitude Oyamel fir, which provide the rare micro-climate necessary to prevent the butterflies from freezing, but keep them cold enough so that their reproductive systems, remain dormant until spring.

"I understand more and more how population is the problem. I was asking almost every peasant I met how many children they have. They say 'I have eight, 12, 15, nine.' These people are in their 50s. I ask how many children their children have. They say, 'Oh, senor, there are so many that we can't count them.' And most of them are getting their living from the forest. They want to get permits to log in the forest." - Homero Aridjis, Mexico's foremost authority on Monarch butterflies

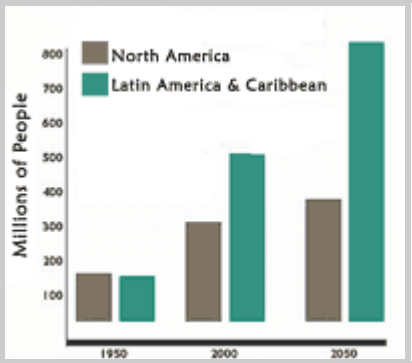
The Mexican forest wintering ground of the Monarch was not discovered by scientists until 1975. By the mid-1980s, scientists realized that rapid deforestation in the Oyamel fir forest was not sustainable, and could drive the Eastern Monarch butterfly to extinction. At that time, the Mexican government created a Monarch reserve of approximately 62 square miles that consisted of no-logging zones at five known wintering sites. But local residents have largely ignored the restrictions, saying they are too poor to care about the Monarch - the trees must fall to put food on the table for hungry mouths. "Maybe it wouldn't be such a bad thing if the butterflies didn't come back. At least we could log," said one campesino.

Ultimately, humans and butterflies are competing for the same forest resources. Unless population growth is stemmed and alternative economic opportunities are developed, the fate of the Monarch may be sealed. Aerial photographs of the region 30 years ago show a forest of nearly 2,000 square miles. Today, only a tenth of it remains. The largest tract today is 20 square miles, five times smaller than the largest tract 15 years ago.

In 1950, the populations of North American and the area that comprises Latin America and the Caribbean were exactly the same.

Today, the population of Latin America and the Caribbean is 200 million people greater than that of the U.S. and Canada.

By 2050, the population of Latin America and the Caribbean is projected to be 400 million people greater than that of North America.



Family Planning Changes Everything

It wasn't supposed to be this way. It was supposed to be much worse. Back in 1970, demographers predicted Mexico's population would rise from 50 to over 132 million by the year 2000.

The good news is that because of voluntary family planning programs, the average number of children per family in Mexico has dropped from over 6 in 1970 to under 3 today. As a consequence, Mexico's population is 32 million lower than predicted 30 years ago. The bad

news is that demographic momentum is still expected to carry Mexico's population past the 135 million mark over the course of the next 30 years.

Investing In the Future

The destruction of the natural world we see across the globe today is "fallout" from the human population explosion that has occurred over the course of the last 50 years. Humans chop down forests, bulldoze mountains, divert streams, spray poisons, introduce invasive species, over-harvest wild animal populations, and pave over land upon which wild creatures depend.

As bad as things are now, they are likely to get worse in the years ahead. The reason: At current fertility rates we will add more people to the planet in the next 50 years than we have in the previous 500,000 years.

Across the globe, over a billion teenagers are now entering their reproductive years - the largest cluster of teenagers in world history. The choices these young people make in the next decade will determine the fate of thousands of species already pushed to the edge of extinction by population-fueled habitat destruction.

Human population growth is about more than wildlife, of course. It's also about tragic rates of infant and maternal mortality, rising rates of unemployment, and escalating social and economic instability in the developing world.

No single investment in environmental protection, human health, or economic and political stability can ever match investments made in international family planning. And yet, despite our enormous wealth, the U.S. is last among the top 20 countries contributing to international family planning assistance.