



## Population, Environment, Migration - The Key Issues

*The Optimum Population Trust (OPT) is a green think-tank and pressure group founded in 1991 to spread awareness of the links between human and environmental well-being and human population levels. It is a membership-based charity with a distinguished list of patrons and advisers. It believes sustainable populations for the world and the UK are significantly lower than present numbers, and campaigns for policies to achieve smaller populations. Because of the withdrawal of environmental and development groups from this area, it is now a lone voice in the UK on population/environment issues.*

THE LAST HALF-CENTURY has supplied growing evidence of crisis in the planet's life-support systems - climate change, loss of biodiversity and habitat, over-use and shortages of resources. Ecological footprinting studies suggest the planet crossed into environmental "overshoot" (humans consuming more resources than the Earth can renewably provide) in the late 1980s and that overshoot, currently 30 per cent, will be 100 per cent by the 2030s: humanity will thus be consuming the equivalent of two planets (*Living Planet Report, WWF, 2008*). OPT believes the **unprecedented growth in world population** over the same period - 2.5 billion in 1950, 6.8 billion today, 9.2 billion (projected) in 2050 - must be regarded as a, if not the, major cause of environmental crisis.

Many people apply the concept of **sustainable population** to every species but their own. OPT believes this is arrogant and anthropocentric. Advances in ecological footprinting since the 1990s make it possible to compare biological capacity, footprint (impact) and human population numbers for countries, regions and the planet as a whole. These suggest that, *at current rates of consumption/impact*, the world's sustainable population in 2005 was 5 billion, against an actual population of 6.5 billion, implying "overpopulation" of 1.5 billion; the comparable figures for the UK were 18m (sustainable), 60m (actual), 42m (overpopulation). OPT calculations suggest the UK ranks among the world's 20 least self-sufficient and most overpopulated countries. Globally, as consumption grows and more strain is placed on the biosphere, population capacity is likely to shrink further, to perhaps 2-3 billion.

A world operating at 100 per cent overshoot is on a collision course with survival. An overpopulated country such as the UK, supplying only 30 per cent of its needs from its own resources, is highly vulnerable in an era of growing food and energy shortages and rising "resource nationalism." Overpopulation on the scale of the UK's is damaging both for humans and their environment. OPT therefore believes economic considerations must be subordinated to environmental ones. The economic rationale for **large-scale immigration** to the UK has, in OPT's view, been refuted: the environmental costs should in any case have ruled it out. Though so far largely discounted, these are substantial. The UK population, currently 61m, is projected to rise to 85m by 2081. Official estimates for the contribution of immigration to population increase have ranged from 69 to 83 per cent. As the main force driving current population growth, immigration feeds through into rising greenhouse gas emissions; more crowding, congestion, development; increased pressure on water and energy supplies, farmland and green space. A population of 85 million would require 15 million more houses - nearly five times the number in London. At least 10 million new dwellings - three Londons, in housing terms - would thus be needed for immigrants and their descendants, as well as, for example, at least six new nuclear power stations or 10,000 wind turbines.

In 2007, 69 of the 195 countries surveyed by the UN had **policies to reduce population growth**. Virtually all of them were *less* populous than the UK. A UK policy would govern factors such as taxes and benefits, education, family planning as well as demographic forces. Official projections suggest, for example, that a strategy of "zero net" migration to the UK, matching incoming to outgoing numbers, could by itself cut the UK's forecast population in 2081 by up to 28 million (33 per cent) - from 85 to 57 million, the equivalent in population of nearly four cities the size of London. Such major variations in outcome, with all the environmental and human impacts involved, explain why OPT believes a **national population policy** is critical to the UK's future, and long overdue.