

Alarm sounds on US population boom Report says growth threatens resources

By John Donnelly, Globe Staff | August 31, 2006

WASHINGTON -- The United States, now at nearly 300 million people, is the only industrialized country that has experienced strong population growth in the last decade, creating concerns that the boom and Americans' huge appetites for food, water, and land will sharply erode the nation's natural resources in coming years, according to a report released yesterday.

The Northeast remains by far the most densely populated region of the nation, but it also had the slowest population growth in the country during the 1990s, including a 2 percent population reduction in urban areas, said the Center for Environment and Population, a Connecticut-based nonprofit research organization that produced the report. In contrast, the South and the West were booming, creating new pressure on fragile environments and water sources.

For the first time, the report compared national and regional population trends with environmental indicators, highlighting stresses that growing populations are placing on nature, according to the report and outside analysts.

While some researchers focus on alarming fertility rates in poor countries, which grew by 16.3 percent from 1995 to 2005, the US population grew by 10.6 percent in that period, or 29 million people, the report noted. Europe during that time grew by 504,000 people, or less than 1 percent. The US population boom was attributed to high birth rates, immigration, and increased longevity. Americans consume like no other nation -- using three times the amount of water per capita than the world average and nearly 25 percent of the world's energy, despite having 5 percent of the global population; and producing five times more daily waste than the average in poor countries.

"Most Americans say that most of the population [increases] are happening in other parts of the world, but if you look at this report, the trends that stand out are what's happening here" in the United States, said Victoria Markham, the center's executive director and author of the report.

One of the most alarming findings was that baby boomers -- those born between 1946 and 1964, about 26 percent of the US population -- were not downsizing as their children became adults and moved out. Instead, many have moved into bigger houses or bought vacation properties, and the tally of homes with space greater than 3,000 square feet went up 11 percent from 1988 to 2003.

In suburbs nationwide, Markham said, "You are losing pieces of land rapidly, and the species you're seeing in your backyards are there because they don't have normal predators anymore, or they have lost their land."

Despite a relatively small migration from urban areas, the Northeast continued to feel the pressures of development. The report said that elevated ozone levels make Maine's Acadia National Park the fifth-most polluted park in the country, and air pollution has damaged 30 percent of Vermont's upland forests.

But the booming South and West regions show some of the most dramatic environmental stresses, according to the report. For example, the four fastest-growing states -- Nevada, Arizona, Colorado, and Utah -- all have areas of acute water shortages.

Martha Farnsworth Riche, a former US Census Bureau director and a current fellow at Cornell University's Center for the Study of Society and Economy, believes that US population increases are partly to blame for environmental headaches attributed to global warming.

“The movement of people to the South and the West . . . increases the vulnerability to weather events like earthquakes, hurricanes, and storms,” she said in a telephone interview. “A lot of people say it’s global warming that is at fault, but sometimes it’s because we put people where we didn’t have them before.”

The report can be found at www.cepnet.org. John Donnelly can be reached at donnelly@globe.com. ■

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