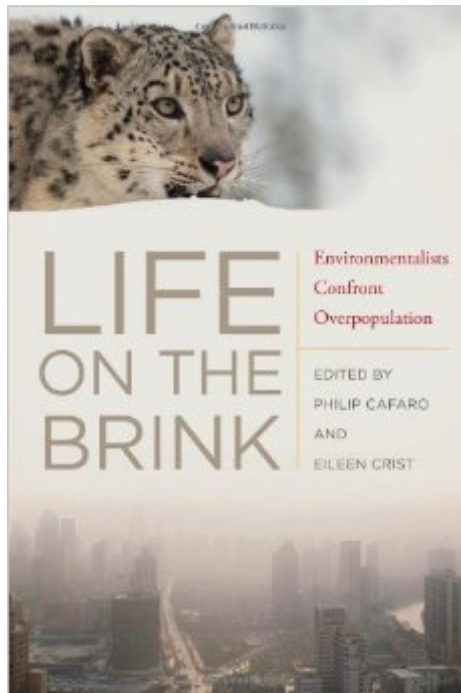


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# Life On The Brink: Environmentalists Confront Overpopulation



## Synopsis

Life on the Brink aspires to reignite a robust discussion of population issues among environmentalists, environmental studies scholars, policymakers, and the general public. Some of the leading voices in the American environmental movement restate the case that population growth is a major force behind many of our most serious ecological problems, including global climate change, habitat loss and species extinctions, air and water pollution, and food and water scarcity. As we surpass seven billion world inhabitants, contributors argue that ending population growth worldwide and in the United States is a moral imperative that deserves renewed commitment. Hailing from a range of disciplines and offering varied perspectives, these essays hold in common a commitment to sharing resources with other species and a willingness to consider what will be necessary to do so. In defense of nature and of a vibrant human future, contributors confront hard issues regarding contraception, abortion, immigration, and limits to growth that many environmentalists have become too timid or politically correct to address in recent years. Ending population growth will not happen easily. Creating genuinely sustainable societies requires major change to economic systems and ethical values coupled with clear thinking and hard work. Life on the Brink is an invitation to join the discussion about the great work of building a better future. Contributors: Albert Bartlett, Joseph Bish, Lester Brown, Tom Butler, Philip Cafaro, Martha Campbell, William R. Catton Jr., Eileen Crist, Anne Ehrlich, Paul Ehrlich, Robert Engelman, Dave Foreman, Amy Gulick, Ronnie Hawkins, Leon Kolankiewicz, Richard Lamm, Jeffrey McKee, Stephanie Mills, Roderick Nash, Tim Palmer, Charmayne Palomba, William Ryerson, Winthrop Staples III, Captain Paul Watson, Don Weeden, George Wuerthner.

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## Customer Reviews

Every now and again a book or article about population comes along that changes your life or at least your way of thinking. For me, three stand out: 'The Population Bomb' by Paul Ehrlich (1968); 'The Coming Anarchy' by Rober D Kaplan (Atlantic Monthly, February 1994) and 'Overshoot: The Ecological Basis of Revolutionary Change' by William Catton Jnr (1980). Now a fourth book, 'Life on the Brink', joins those three as a game-changer. The title of the book is apt: overpopulation is indeed pushing life on Earth to the brink. Editors Philip Cafaro and Eileen Crist have gathered together essays from virtually everyone who is anyone in the population movement today, not least the above-mentioned Paul (with Anne) Ehrlich as well as William Catton Jnr. But we hear also from the great Al Bartlett, Lester Brown, William Ryerson, Leon Kolankiewicz, Martha Campbell, Dave Forman, Bob Engelman and a host of others. Every contribution is worth reading. Cafaro is a philosopher and it is reflected in his own beautifully written contributions including the epilogue where he considers whether humanity is a cancer on the earth. Perhaps it prompted the recent comment by British naturalist and broadcaster David Attenborough that humans are a plague upon the Earth. Whether it did or not, reading this book will leave you concluding that indeed we, with our excessive numbers, are a cancer or a plague. As the editors themselves and many contributors point out, population growth is a major driver of ecological destruction. This not only affects other species, it affects us for we are wholly dependent on the planet's natural processes for providing us with life's necessities: clean air and water, food, pollination and a liveable climate. But that is not to say it is all depressing. Amy Gulick in a wonderful essay called 'Salmon in the Trees' describes the pristine wilderness of Tongass National Forest in southeast Alaska where salmon have come to spawn and die, bears gather to feed on the salmon and bald eagles fly overhead. 'When the cycle of life is whole, so are we,' she writes. 'If we can change our relationship with Earth, we can change our population so as not to damage our life-support systems.' It may be too late, of course, to turn the population ship Titanic around before we lose thousands of species in this, the sixth great mass extinction. Let's hope not. Certainly, this excellent book will help inform the public and decision-makers that we need to act to end population growth, and we need to do it now.

The authors make a great case that we already have too many people on our planet. I agree with them that the United States is overpopulated and consumes too many finite natural resources. We

may indeed be a cancer on the Earth; we are arrogantly destroying habitat for wildlife, including marine life, all at great peril to ourselves. We eat too much meat, which is a fossil-fuel hungry way to produce food. I agree with the authors that there is still hope for our planet, but only if the United States and other countries recognize that the best fix for overpopulation is recognizing that people, especially women, should be educated, and that everyone must have easy access to free or affordable birth control. The U.S. must make international family planning funding a top priority. All individuals must make the conscious decision to limit the size of their families to one or two children, or (preferably) to not reproduce at all. Additionally, those of us in developed or developing countries must reduce our consumption levels, along with our population levels. Even if we consume less and the population continues to grow, there is no chance the world we love will prosper. I firmly agree with the authors that if we do not heed these warnings, our planet is at great peril: the climate will grow warmer leading to more weather-related calamities, wildlife will continue to disappear, sprawl will increase, and fossil fuel energy use will rise (renewable energy sources will not be sufficient to keep up). I strongly recommend you take the time to read this incredible, eye-opening book. I also recommend that we start talking publicly and frequently about these issues, even if they are controversial and, perhaps, not politically correct.

Applause for the thinking behind this collection of academics, activists, and other expert voices. As an anthology, unevenness in the contributions and varying degrees of effectiveness are inevitable, but taken holistically, there is much to admire. There are bothersome blind spots, there are essays that are less convincing than others, and there are essays that make only a passing mention of environmental protection thus feel like they were included solely to diversify the book. To be fair, confronting overpopulation needs an interdisciplinary approach that addresses social, ethical, cultural, political, religious, scientific, and economic factors. What is grimly clear is that those of us who see human overpopulation as the single biggest threat to the planet have lost too much ground since the 80s and 90s. The public enjoys a false sense of security thanks to pseudoscience about declining fertility rates and rising contraceptive prevalence, red-herring arguments that overconsumption or population distribution is the real problem, and outright denial by people addicted to breeding. With some climate scientists now predicting this big blue marble will likely be unlivable by 2050, I don't see any happy endings in store for the new people we keep making, and there are never happy endings for nonhuman animals, as 60 billion land animals alone killed each year just for food. The solutions, even those from these accomplished essay writers, feel feeble. At least a passing interest in overpopulation and/or environmentalism would be necessary for

appreciating this book. I adhere to a philosophy of voluntary human extinction, so I'm already in the choir. For more see vhemt.org.

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