

Environmental movements need to critique capitalism, not overpopulation

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Main image: People walking across world map (Klaus Vedfelt/Getty Images)



Last week, Bob Brown, the founder of the Australian Greens, [made statements](#) asserting that Australia needs to be a leader in slashing global population growth. This is not the first time that Brown has pointed to population growth as an existential threat to the planet.

In 1996, he argued that population decline was the '[precondition of everything the Greens wanted to achieve](#)'. Their original population policy campaigned for a reduction in immigration. In 2010, the Greens charter '[believe\(d\) the world's population is excessive and should be reduced.](#)' and advocated 'eliminating the causes of population growth.'

These ideas are but a small snapshot of a larger issue. The environmental movement in general [has a serious race problem](#). Make no mistake, an ideology that says humans are the problem is a colonial ecology; [the Malthusian fear of overpopulation is rooted in racist ideals](#).

Let us consider who might be the people tasked with having fewer babies. The [West has had a declining population for years](#), to the point where certain [western countries have taken to paying people to have babies](#). Instead, it is countries like [India which are facing a booming population](#) or continents like Africa where ['all 10 countries that are projected to experience the biggest growth in population by 2100 are in...'](#) Hence, when environmentalists talk about reducing population growth, their target is the Global South.

But the truth about population growth and its impact on the environment is obscured. The places with high levels of population growth account for [just 10 per cent of lifestyle consumption emissions while the richest in the world make up half of the total emissions](#). Activist Naomi Klein points out that the places with '... the highest levels of population growth, (are) the poorest parts of the world with the lowest carbon footprints.' Since most of the people in countries with rapidly growing populations will be poor (by Western standards), this means their consumption of per-capita resources will be low. Simply put, the people having too many babies are not the ones causing environmental degradation. The environmental movement's focus on reducing population growth does not make sense in the light of the actual numbers.

Instead, looking at capitalism and western colonialism makes more sense. The use of resources and pollution levels are not divided equally across the globe. Environmental devastation is not directly caused by individuals or households, but by corporations. [Just a hundred companies are responsible for 71 per cent of the world's emissions](#).

'Green parties all over the world are fashioning themselves as a credible alternative to current governments which are simply not doing enough to stem the tide of climate disaster, but they cannot do that if they are engaging in racist language dressed up as caring for the environment.'

It seems more environmentally prudent for Australia to become a leader in reducing the number of corporations mining the earth.

But this has never been the prevalent ideology because the global environmental movement has been [overwhelmingly led by wealthy, white men](#). These groups have lacked the perspective and will to draw connections between environmental devastation, racism, sexism, inequality and other social injustices. [The idea that population growth, in and of itself, causes environmental destruction has been dominant in Australia's environment movement](#), even though Klein has argued that many [big green environmental groups pose an even greater threat to the planet than climate deniers](#) because of their willingness to work with corporate polluters.

Positing population as an environmental problem is an [eco-fascist tactic](#) that considers poor people, black and brown people etc., as the problem. Without an analysis of the vastly unequal distribution of wealth and resources, the movement focuses its efforts on reducing the populations in developing economies, which are predominantly not white or western and are still dealing with the ravages of colonialism.

Pointing the finger at the poorest among us and demanding that they stop having babies is eugenicist rhetoric. Instead of looking at how capitalism uses resources at an unsustainable rate, environmental movements that use the overpopulation argument seek to reduce the human population so that the wealthy can continue to plunder the earth's resources.

Thinking that human overpopulation is the problem is a line of thought which leads to the idea that there needs to be fewer humans on earth. This usually unleashes policies around sterilisation or [allowing 'certain people' to die](#) (mostly people with disabilities, aged, poor, ect.) and eventually ends in the predictable culling of 'undesirables' as justified by appealing to what is good for the planet.

Think this is fearmongering or an overactive imagination? [The El Paso Texas shooter was an eco-fascist](#), as was [the Christchurch shooter](#). The Texas shooter's manifesto expressly referred to the '[immigration as environmental warfare.](#)' Their actions were the inevitable final point of a racist discourse that blames the demise of the environment on populations.

The Greens came under fire for their rhetoric in 2010 where talking about [reducing immigration had them lumped in with parties like One Nation](#). They have since removed the references to immigration in their [current charter](#), but the question remains as to whether the environmental movement as a whole has made a serious effort to fundamentally root out this harmful and racist ideology.

Green parties all over the world are fashioning themselves as a credible alternative to current governments which are simply not doing enough to stem the tide of climate disaster, but they cannot do that if they are engaging in racist language dressed up as caring for the environment. As long as the environmental movement cannot make a sustained and critical analysis of the links between the destruction of the environment and capitalism, these parties remain little different from the multitude of mainstream politics.

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