

WHY GREENPEACE DOESN'T CAMPAIGN ON POPULATION AND QUAKER CONCERN OVER POPULATION'S RESPONSE

It has long been a cause of considerable frustration that many of the main environmental organisations, such as Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and WWF, consistently refuse to engage with the population issue, obvious though it is that is a main driver of many if not all of the issues they are campaigning on. To quote Chris Packham: *“There’s no point bleating about the future of pandas, polar bears and tigers where we’re not addressing the one single factor that’s putting more pressure on the ecosystem than any other - namely the ever-increasing size of the world’s population.”*

But something must have been getting through, because last August, a page explaining why Greenpeace doesn't campaign on population appeared on their website [here](#).¹

Here, Quaker Concern Over Population (QCOP) addresses some of the points made in the article. No doubt readers may like to elaborate. Take a look the original document and you may even be inspired to write to Greenpeace on the subject. We doubt they would have posted the article if they hadn't been receiving complaints from supporters.

Is population control the right way to address climate change and other environmental problems?

Greenpeace: *Is population control the right way to address climate change and other environmental problems? The evidence shows that tackling unsustainable consumption is fairer and more effective.*

Our response: In our view we need to do both (although QCOP avoids the term *population control* since it implies coercion). In fact a recent study found that more than three-quarters of the reductions in carbon emissions achieved since 1990 by increased efficiency and reducing carbon dioxide emissions from energy production have been cancelled out by the effects of a growing population.

Greenpeace: *Today, the world’s human population is around 7.9 billion. That’s increased from around one billion in 1800, although the rate of growth has been falling since the sixties.*

Our response: Actually global population is already well over 8 billion and has increased by around 47 million since the article was posted, that is the greater part of the entire population of England. Where are all these people supposed to live? The fact that the growth rate is falling doesn't mean that we have stopped increasing; investing £1m at 0.01% brings more returns than £100 at 10%. Fertility has reduced but not enough to counter growth in numbers.

Greenpeace: *Some people suggest that the best (or only) way to reduce the damage humans do to the environment is to reduce the human population.*

Our response: No one claims that population reduction is sufficient on its own, but it is an essential component of what must be done. The best way is to do both together: reduce average consumption and population since overall consumption is a product of the two.

¹<https://www.greenpeace.org.uk/news/why-greenpeace-uk-doesnt-campaign-on-population/>

Greenpeace: *But the evidence shows that wasteful overconsumption - driven mostly by the richest people and societies - causes far more damage. From a moral and practical perspective, it's also a much easier problem to solve.*

Our response: It doesn't seem much easier to us. Where is the evidence that the problem has been solved to any significant degree in the 50 plus years we have known about climate change, during which time the population has more than doubled? And wouldn't it be easier to provide family planning advice and contraceptives to very many millions of women in the world who want it, than just try to get us rich people to stop consuming on the scale required?

Greenpeace: *Many of the people who raise concerns about population are well-intentioned. But the idea that overpopulation is causing climate change is inaccurate, and unfairly places blame on poorer societies in the Global South.*

Our response: We do not blame anyone for being unable to control their fertility if they are denied the means of doing so. The causes of climate change are complicated, but the idea that population is not a factor is nonsense. Overall consumption is a product of average consumption and total population, so it is a mathematical certainty that population is a factor in the equation. The interpretation of blame is just an opinion. And it is not just emissions. Everyone needs space to live, they need houses, schools, roads, farmland and hospitals. So even if we could live with zero emissions, more people means more biodiversity loss which we (and Greenpeace) are surely equally concerned about.

Greenpeace: *These societies have faster-growing populations, but much lower consumption. This argument also diverts attention from the much greater responsibility of richer societies in the global north to reduce their emissions.*

Our response: We need to include everyone in the fight against climate change and use everything at our disposal or the human species will not survive. QCOP advocates choosing to have fewer children in the Global North, where the responsibility is greater and where we have a moral right to do so, and helping those in the Global South to choose for themselves, trusting that they will decide for themselves what is in their best interests.

Greenpeace: *Because most people in the global south are people of colour, there is a racial justice dimension to population control argument. Regardless of the intention, it can reinforce racist attitudes and feed long-standing racial inequality and injustice.*

Our response: The environment does not care what the colour of the skin is of those suffering the effects of climate change. We need everyone on board. To say that people of colour can play no part in combating climate change could equally well be said to be racist, and is potentially deeply patronising.

Is population growth causing climate change?

Greenpeace: *The causes of climate change and biodiversity loss are well documented, and are down to human consumption of energy, food, and other natural resources. However, consumption of resources varies greatly in different parts of the world.*

Our response: Agreed. But more people means more consumption. Besides, people everywhere still need water and still have to eat. Pressures on land use, fuelled by population growth at least as much as by climate change, are a major driver of the biodiversity crisis.

Greenpeace: *Each person in Australia, for example, has an average carbon footprint of around 15 tonnes per year. The figure in Mali is just 0.17 tonnes. In just over four days, the average Australian emits as much as the average Malian does in a year. It takes just under two weeks for an average person in the UK to emit as much as the average Malian does in a year.*

Our response: Are we then asking Malians to stay underdeveloped and poor? If we fail to help them with reproductive choices now, they will simply consume more as they develop: maybe not as much as westerners but more than they are doing now. Are we hoping that they will just stay poor, or are we saying that we should all reduce our consumption to the Malian level?

Greenpeace: ...*If we're concerned about the climate, then overconsumption of resources (and resulting carbon pollution) is the main problem to solve.*

Our response: How successful has solving this problem been in the time that the world population has more than doubled? Time is short and we can no longer afford to address only half of the equation.

Won't more people consume more resources?

Greenpeace: *Yes - more people, especially in rich countries, would consume more resources. But populations in most rich countries have stabilised or are even declining, thanks to better education and reproductive care.*

Our response: This is a good argument against wasting too much energy advocating for smaller populations in rich countries, where consumption is predominant, and campaigning for reproductive choice in poor countries, where consumption is not (yet) so big a problem (but soon will be unless they stay poor), and pressure on other resources such as clean water and space is critical.

Greenpeace: *A small number of extremely rich people produce more carbon pollution than billions of the world's poorest people.*

Our response: Yes, but they are small in number and probably for the most part highly resistant to being convinced by environmental campaigners. A more fruitful avenue than the top 1% is the next 10%, which includes a lot of people with fairly average wealth in richer countries. It is our problem and we must let our lives speak and try to convince others to do the same by whatever means, be it reducing carbon footprint or limiting travel or choosing one less child.

How does Greenpeace UK campaign on this?

Greenpeace: *We don't support population control in the global south as a legitimate solution to the climate and nature crises. Campaigning for population control, while doing little to propose reductions in consumption in the richest countries, would be unfair and ineffective.*

Our response: QCOP does not support population control, but we do advocate for reproductive choice everywhere. We also agree that consumption on average must be lower. For those people who want reproductive choice, why not work to make it possible? In those countries which have tried it, such as Bangladesh and Thailand, it has been an extremely effective way of reducing the population and providing a higher standard of living for everyone. The key thing is trust, we trust everyone to decide what is in their best interests and hope it is lower population growth, because it is clear to us that this is the same thing.

Greenpeace: *Instead, Greenpeace UK campaigns to stop the overconsumption of plastic, fossil fuels, industrial meat and so on. And we work to create a fairer, zero-carbon global economy.*

Our response: But why deny that population is a factor? You will never solve the problem by reducing consumption alone. So why not do both?

Greenpeace: ...*Greenpeace UK has made a commitment to anti-racism in its operations and campaigning. We recognise the link between racism and environmental destruction. Of course, not everyone who talks about population is motivated by racism. But there is a clear racial*

dimension to this issue, and racist political movements are some of the biggest proponents of these arguments.

Our response: Many women in the global south are crying out for education and access to family planning. In our view it is racist to deny this. You should look into what women from the countries concerned have to say about this.

What about reproductive rights?

Greenpeace: *Some people call for better reproductive rights as a way to reduce population growth and pressures on the environment. And it's true that improving access to education and family planning resources helps people have fewer children. But as a progressive, values-based organisation, we support reproductive rights on their own merits. They shouldn't be a means to an end, or a way to sanitise more coercive approaches to population control.*

Our response: First of all, many people would love to have access to education and family planning but can't access it at the moment. So what is wrong with advocating that more resources from the rich North be available also in the Global South? Moreover, our aim is the continued survival of the human species. We do not support any coercive approaches. Our approach is wholly choice-based.

Greenpeace: *So we'll continue to focus on the fairest and most effective way to tackle climate change: reducing wasteful overconsumption and championing sustainable solutions.*

Our response: Good luck! But will it be enough?

Quaker Concern Over Population Committee
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