

The UN predicts that by 2050, there could be 9.6 billion people on the planet. Journalist Alan Weisman says unless we lower birth rates, life on Earth will suffer.

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On Oct. 29 at 4 p.m. PST, the global population was 7.12 billion people, and our population keeps growing. Every four-and-a-half days, one million more children are born. UN officials predict that by 2100, there may be 10.9 billion of us. That would be world record.

Alan Weisman thinks it would be imprudent to hit that milestone. Indeed, Weisman, author of the international bestseller "The World Without Us," believes that we should implement steps to reduce childbirth to preserve the planet — before it's too late.

Not that he's a doomsayer. Indeed, in Weisman's new book, "Countdown: Our Last, Best Hope for a Future on Earth?" (Little, Brown and Company, \$28), you can sense his love of humanity. Yet he still believes we need a prescription to curb our propensity to procreate. To find answers, he traveled the globe, making stops in countries such as Niger, where women average between seven and eight children, the highest rate on Earth, and Japan, where the population has been dropping since 2006.

**Rosette Royale:** At the beginning of your book you mention that in 1815, the world's population was one billion. Now we've surpassed seven billion.

**Alan Weisman:** Yeah, that was fast.

**R.R.:** Then you ask: "How the hell did that happen?" So how the hell did it happen?

**A.W.:** Well, up until about 300 years ago, we were pretty much subject to the same laws of any other species: We existed, we procreated, we made copies of ourselves. We made extra copies of ourselves because we knew that, unfortunately, some of those kids died. In fact, most children did not make it to their fifth birthday, which, if we think about the pain of our ancestors, that's pretty sobering. On the other hand, that was normal. So women would have six or seven children in the hopes that some would survive.

Our species, when we'd actually gotten to a billion, it meant that we had made it a little easier on ourselves. The Industrial Revolution was helpful. People lived in closer quarters, there was more access to doctors, even if the doctors weren't very good. But doctors started getting real good in 1798, when Edward Jenner invented a vaccine for smallpox, our first vaccine, which was quickly followed by more vaccines and methods of eradicating insects that carried other diseases. We learned how to pasteurize milk; we learned how to wash our hands in hospitals. That alone was huge. Just the idea of using disinfectant in hospitals dropped the infant mortality rate: Ten times the number of kids started to survive. So as a result of medical technology, more children were surviving infancy and more people were living longer, so they were still hanging around when



Passengers sit on the top of an overcrowded train as it approaches a railway station in Dhaka, Bangladesh Aug. 8, 2013. PHOTO BY ANDREW BIRAJ, COURTESY OF REUTERS

other people were born.

And then, in the 20th century, two other things happened. The first was that we figured out how to pull nitrogen out of the air and chemically apply it to soils. Before, the amount of plant life on the planet was limited to relatively few plants that had roots that could fix nitrogen: beans, legumes. Artificial nitrogen fertilizer just blew the lid off what nature does. All this extra plant life suddenly could grow, and we used it to feed ourselves. And three relatively rare weeds in prehistory — wheat, corn, rice — were proliferating.

The next step was in the 1960s, with what we call the Green Revolution that was the result of crossbreeding plants: We weren't inserting genes, but we were selecting plants for their genetic qualities. Among the qualities was shorter plants, so they'd be putting more energy into grain rather than long stalk. Dwarf wheat varieties suddenly changed the world, and it was rather opportune because by then, our population on the planet had risen to a little under half of what it is today. And even then, people were starting to get very, very nervous.

I go to the places where famine was averted: India and Pakistan. That means

that people who would've otherwise died of famine lived to have more children, and those children then lived to have more children. Today India is about to surpass China as the most populous nation on the planet. And Pakistan has one of the fastest growing birth rates in the world, and it's one of the places that scares me the most. They've got between 185 and 190 million people today, and they're the size of Texas. By the end of the century, they're going to have many more people than the United States has now, and they're still going to be the size of Texas. [Pakistan's] economy is nowhere capable of employing all these people. So everywhere you see all these frustrated, sullen, pissed off young men. In the cities, usually the best job they can get is being hired thugs for warlords, or in the north, it's kind of a breeding territory for what we here refer to as terrorists. And this is a country that is a nuclear power. Kind of scary.

**R.R.:** Before I get to some of your points, I want to ask: Now that we're at seven-plus billion people, is there an optimal number of people?

**A.W.:** There probably is, but there are a few

ways to consider what that optimum would be.

First, I dismiss the opinions that we do not have a problem with the number of people. There are pro-growth economists who always talk about the more people, the better, partly because it's more consumers, but what they're really talking about is that supply of cheap labor. Then those poor people compete with each other for salaries that are oftentimes really depressed, if not just plain inhuman.

We've got another contingent that thinks we're not anywhere near the optimal population, people who say that there's plenty of food on this planet, and we could feed everybody if we just shared better. Well, first of all, we're not going to do that. Most food today is grown, not for feeding people, but because it's a commodity. It's something that people sell for profit. They're not going to give away their commodity for free. I wish it was the case, but they don't. So the idea of being equitable and sharing has always been more ideal than reality. [Pause.] I'm sorry if you find that depressing.

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# Crowd Control



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**R.R.:** How does spirituality tie into human population?

**A.W.:** Every religion, just like every nation, starts out with this mandate to be fruitful and multiply. It's a strategy. Have a bunch of kids, so you can be the biggest nation or tribe or religion around. So all religions start out as polygamous. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were polygamous; Muhammad was polygamous. Then they get very numerous, very fast, and the extremists in those religions don't grow with the times.

This is the situation with the Catholics. They make kind of a funny mistake in the 19th century, and it's now coming back to haunt them. They invented this concept called papal infallibility that didn't exist before. So suddenly it's not just the pope [speaking], it's the word of God solicited through the pope. In the 20th century as birth control starts to arrive on the scene, the Church was against this. They want a lot

of Catholics on this planet.

By the 60s, when birth control pills come out, most Catholics wanted to be able to use them. There was a commission to study the problem, and by a vote of 89-10, [Catholic bishops] voted to accept contraception under canon law. But then this Polish bishop named Karol Wojtyla, who later became Pope John Paul II, wrote an essay, which essentially said that if they allow this to happen, we'll essentially be saying that for part of the century, we were wrong. So that's a case where religion becomes problematic.

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, they realized after encouraging huge population growth, they were basically going to be Pakistan: too many men and unable to employ them all. So they reversed course, including issuing a fatwa saying that if wisdom dictates you've hit the number of kids you can take care of, there's nothing in the Quran that says you can't use anything from condoms to a vasectomy or tubal ligation. And Iran, using the blessing of its high mullah of Islam, was able to turn around their population growth rather

quickly. So as always, religion is a double-edged sword.

**R.R.:** You talk about one great form of birth control: educated women.

**A.W.:** It's the best contraception of all.

The educated woman, she tends to stay in school till her studies are done, before child bearing. Most educated women tend to have one or two kids.

**R.R.:** Why did you decide to find out about population growth and potential control?

**A.W.:** So there were these astronomical numbers, and they're just too hard to grasp. So I did some long division. And it turned out that every four-and-a-half days, we're adding a million people to the planet. That got my attention, and that got a lot of readers' attention. So I left that hanging at the end of "The World Without Us." And I realized it's pretty interesting. It's such a loaded topic, people are very emotional about it. We talk about bears and wolves and balance in a national park: But this is about

us. I wondered: Could we realistically do this? Which is why I went to so many countries. It was a much bigger project that I bargained for. I'm still alive, but there were times where I wondered if the book would finish me before I finished the book.

**R.R.:** I hope this isn't too personal of a question. How big is your family?

**A.W.:** My wife and I had a daughter, and, unfortunately, she died in infancy.

It's one of life's tragedies. They hit us all. We had some pregnancies after that, but none of them lasted. In retrospect, I wish we would've pursued adoption. Adoption agencies don't like the idea that I travel so much, and we thought about foreign adoption, but I've worked in a lot of countries where my colleagues are incensed that their countries have become baby farms to the U.S. It was hard for us to deal with that. Looking back now, I wish we'd done it anyway.

But that brings up something else. People who think that large families are beautiful can still have them. The one natural resource we're not running out of is kids who need a home. So adoption is a wonderful thing.

**R.R.:** You said earlier this might sound a little depressing. So do you consider yourself a pessimist?

**A.W.:** No, I consider myself a realist and a journalist. Again, being a *Homo sapiens* myself, it's hard not to react emotionally. But I've realized that my species is too much of a good thing, and we are overwhelming the system that supports us. That can't go on forever. I think that we're in a make or break century right now. Here in the 21st century, there's no way we can continue on with what's going on with the atmosphere and temperatures. There are only so many tricks to grow more food. Rice is probably the most important food on the planet, given the number of people who depend on it. A lot of people would be ruined if the seas rise. Do we have the money to put dikes all along Asia and the Philippine Islands?

It's hard to grasp this, because you and I were born in the midst of the population explosion. This is what we think of as normal. But it's very abnormal. And it's creeping up ever so slightly.

Fortunately, contraception is the technology we have. It's cheap, and there are wonderful side benefits. Educate a lot of women, and they become contributors to societies and economies.

We're always talking about social inequity. It's one of the fastest ways I can think of of spreading the wealth around.

Alan Weisman is the author of several books, including "The World Without Us." He writes for *Harper's*, the *New York Times Magazine*, *The Atlantic*, *Discover*, *Vanity Fair*, *Wilson Quarterly*, *Mother Jones* and *Orion*.

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