



## The World's People

### GEOGRAPHY

### How Many Is Too Many?

*Experts, including geographers, agree that Earth's population growth is one of the most important issues for the new millennium. Here, Harm J. de Blij (pronounced "duh BLAY"), former geography expert for both the ABC and NBC television networks, presents his views.*

Among the nearly 200 countries in the world, the United State's population is not growing nearly as fast as many others. . . . Still, the pressure of population is felt even here, in spacious America. Suburbanization has created vast rings of urban sprawl around original cities. . . . In parts of suburban America, the very irritations of crowding that impelled [convinced] many to move out of the city have caught up with the movers.

Sitting in a traffic jam is a small price to pay for population growth. Elsewhere in the world, people are starving or suffering from the permanent ravages [damage] of malnutrition. By the hundreds of millions, these people pay the price of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Because the truth is that all people on Earth today *could* be fed—not well, but adequately for survival—if there were ways to distribute available supplies to all. Unfortunately, that is not happening. . . .

As recently as the 1970s, the specter of inevitable and permanent food shortages still loomed, and it was impossible to predict that the Earth's total food supply could actually catch up with the ever-increasing demand. But technological developments in farming raised production to unprecedented [never seen before] levels, and by the 1980s the fear of global hunger had receded. Today, the food problem is more geographic than anything else. Whether you'll go through life adequately nourished is a matter of location, of where you happened to be born. The powerless and influenceless peoples of the African and Asian interiors are the hungriest. But India, for example, is now able to feed itself under normal circumstances, an achievement few foresaw just a generation ago.

This does not mean that the future is risk-free. Major environmental changes over the short term could reduce the output from world breadbaskets such as the U.S. Midwest or the North China Plain. Unanticipated outbreaks of plant diseases could set back the ongoing agricultural revolution. And the inexorable [unstoppable] march of population growth could once again outstrip the Earth's productive capacity. . . .

About 180 million babies are born every year, and about 85 million people die, many of them at birth. This means that we are adding about 95 million to our number every year: nearly 8 million per month, 270,000 per day, 11,000 per hour! . . . If some killer epidemic or natural disaster or nuclear war does not slow us down, there will be 10 billion—10,000 million—people on this planet around the year 2030. Many . . . in the

field of population geography see this population explosion as our greatest challenge. . . .

But not everyone agrees. There are those who argue that the world must pass through this period of explosive population growth, with all its destructive consequences, in order to reach a point where it will fizzle out—where the world’s population will stabilize. The World Bank, in its annual *World Development Report*, even publishes a table giving the date when individual countries’ populations are projected to cease growing. For the moment, though, world population as a whole continues to erupt, producing streams of numbers unimagined just a century ago.

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From “People, People Everywhere” (retitled “How Many Is Too Many?”) from Harm de Blij’s *Geography Book: A Leading Geographer’s Fresh Look at Our Changing World*. Copyright ©1995 by Harm de Blij. Reprinted by permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

**Understanding What You Read** After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions.

1. According to de Blij, how has agriculture changed since the 1970s?

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2. de Blij claims that hunger today is more a problem of geography than population growth. Explain what he means by this statement.

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3. What two possibilities does de Blij raise that could cause the prospect of worldwide food shortages to again become a concern?

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**Activity**

Identify an organization in your community or region that is involved with the issue of world hunger. Prepare a report about its activities and how individuals or groups might help the organization in its efforts.