

We need to talk about how population growth is harming the planet

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No planet B | Discussions of population's impact on Earth have been off limits, but scientists and conservationists are challenging the taboo and politicians must do the same.

ONE occupational hazard of writing about the environment is readers criticising my failure to mention the P-word. No, not polar bears, or plastic. Population. There is no environmental crisis, I'm told, that cannot be blamed on there being too many people, or solved by – well, you can see the problem with following this line of argument.

Last month, I spent a slightly weird Saturday afternoon at a public conference hosted by pressure group Population Matters, the true believers of the population movement. Some of the passionate but rather eccentric discussions reminded me of former prime minister David Cameron's dismissal of the UK Independence Party as "fruit cakes and loonies" (yes, he also called them "closet racists" – we'll get into that later).

To be clear, I don't think population activists are fruit cakes or loonies (or racists). Decades of beating your head against a brick wall is enough to make anyone's eyes swivel. But, like UKIP, there are signs that their hobby horse is riding into the mainstream.

Population wasn't always a fringe issue. In the 1960s and 1970s, it was regarded as an urgent environmental problem. But it gradually faded from view as campaigners focused on more socially acceptable problems, such as overconsumption.

Eventually, the P-word became taboo, tainted by what has been called "population shaming". This is the idea that any calls for population control are hypocritical, racist and coercive, typically consisting of rich, white people lecturing poor, non-white people to have fewer children. Those same advocates consume rampantly while blaming environmental problems on population growth in the developing world. Given that most of the growth up to 2050 is projected to happen in Africa, you can see why accusations of racism and neocolonialism strike a chord.

Population activists deny this, pointing out that countries such as Bangladesh have radically decreased fertility rates without coercion. They also make it clear that they regard Western overconsumption as part of the problem. Their goal, they say, is to empower people – especially women – to have smaller families.

Nonetheless, mainstream green organisations have studiously avoided talking about population.

At the conference, however, change was in the air. "Population, I feel, is rising up the agenda," said Population Matters' director, Robin Maynard. "It is due, finally, to have the proper public discourse and policy action it merits." Cue wild applause.

This isn't just wishful thinking. One cause for his optimism was conservation group WWF's official presence at the conference – a first, after decades of sidestepping the issue. Its UK director of science, Mark Wright, endured a somewhat torrid afternoon, heckled by the crowd and the butt of frequent WWF-bashing. But he kept his cool and made it clear the organisation now acknowledges population as part of the problem. It felt like the start of a genuine rapprochement.

"Scientists are also challenging the taboo: a new report warning about dire species loss refers to human numbers as a driver"

An even bigger factor is David Attenborough. Every episode of his new Netflix series *Our Planet* (made in collaboration with WWF) begins with him saying: "Just 50 years ago, we finally ventured to the moon... Since then, the human population has more than doubled." When Attenborough speaks, people listen. Consider the impact *Blue Planet II* had on awareness of plastic.

Scientists are also challenging the taboo. This month's report by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services made headlines for its dire warnings about declining populations of wild species. What went largely unnoticed was its frequent reference to human population as a driver.

The next hurdle is to get population on the global policy agenda. The first opportunity is next year, when the Convention on Biological Diversity is up for renewal. Maynard and others are campaigning to have population acknowledged as a problem, and perhaps even included in official targets. They are also calling for a UN Framework Convention on Population, like the climate one.

They can expect pushback. The forces of reaction are strong, as shown by vicious media attacks on Greta Thunberg and Extinction Rebellion. Population activists will be called fruit cakes, loonies and closet racists. But they can console themselves that UKIP eventually forced a referendum and won it.

Don't get me wrong. I'm no fan of UKIP. But I am a fan of denialists finally seeing the light.