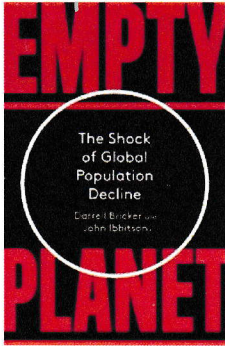


Book Reviews



Bricker, Darrell Jay and Ibbotson, John

Empty planet: the shock of global population decline.

London: Robinson, 2019.

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Review by Dr T.A. Welborn

The eye-catching title is pure hyperbole, reflecting an unusual optimism about the future. Bricker is a public opinion researcher and Ibbotson a political journalist and writer at large. After writing *The Big Shift*, about polarity in Canadian politics, they tackle the challenging topic of global population trends. Their hypothesis is that we face a natural progressive decline in population numbers, even in the absence of cataclysms such as nuclear wars, pandemic infections, and meteorites. They acknowledge that the world's present human burden is straining the environment, and it contributes to species extinction, and global warming. Joining a small group of demographers that have challenged the "myth" of the progressive population explosion, they disagree with the United Nations Population Division predictions, although these have been surprisingly accurate. The book is not always easy reading, but navigating the text is aided by a good index, and it is well referenced.

After addressing a brief history of the Earth's population and covering the scourges that have nearly eliminated us, they deal with the 20th century. This was marked by a progressive increase in life expectation, a post-World War 2 baby boom (considered to be a blip), and the advent of the contraceptive pill, leading to rapidly rising population numbers. The authors postulate that the rate of population increase has stabilised and will reverse in the 21st century. They deny the previous prophets of doom that included Malthus, who expressed grim concerns in 1798 that the exponential rise in human numbers would by far exceed the improvements in agriculture and food production. Although time has proved Malthus wrong, some modern writers consider that his prediction was merely premature. Then in 1968, biologist Paul Ehrlich published "The Population Bomb", claiming that the battle to feed humanity had been lost, and within 20 years, hundreds of millions of people will starve to death. This was also inaccurate, for we live in a better world than he predicted, with much less extreme poverty, and a general expansion of wealth.

The United Nation's *World Population Prospects 2017* is used as the source of future estimates in this book. Population numbers will be 8.6 billion by 2030, and 11.2 billion at the turn of the next century, citing the UN's "medium variant" (or projected median value). But the writers of *Empty Planet* prefer to use the "low variant scenario", which is a theoretical prediction in the UN report that assumes an immediate world-wide reduction in fertility rates of 0.5 children per female. This hypothetical calculation suggests that human numbers will peak at 8.5 billion in 2050, and then decline to 7.4 billion by 2100, about the same as now. Bricker and Ibbotson's