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Scientists: Save the planet—have fewer kids

As rising populations strain a warming planet, a British journal suggests having smaller families

By Laurie Goering

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LONDON — There are plenty of ways to cut your carbon footprint, whether it's driving less or buying an energy-efficient refrigerator. But the British Medical Journal, in an editorial last month, urged a more controversial one: having fewer children.

With 60 million people already living in one of the most densely populated countries in the world, the journal said, British couples should aim to have no more than two children as part of their contribution to worldwide efforts to reduce carbon emissions, stem climate change and ease demands on the world's resources.

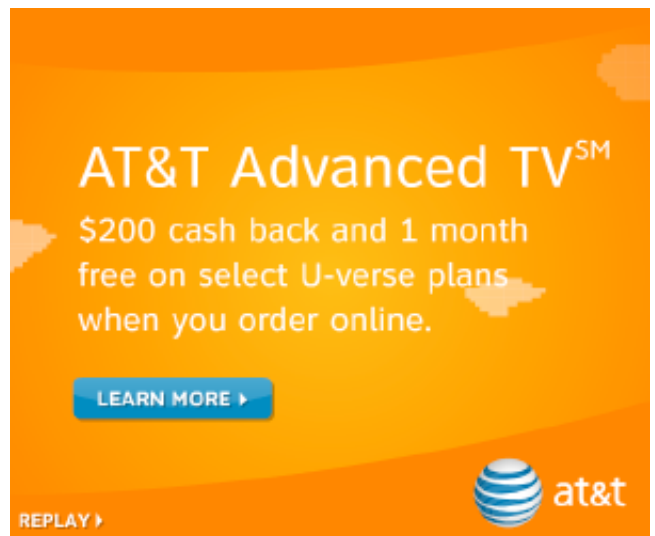
Limiting family size is "the simplest and biggest contribution anyone can make to leaving a habitable planet for our grandchildren," the editorial's authors said.

Family planning as a means to reduce climate change has been little talked about in international climate forums, largely because it is so politically sensitive. China's leaders, however, regularly argue that their country should get emission reduction credits because of their one-child policy, and many environmentalists—and even a growing number of religious and ethics scholars—say the biblical command to "be fruitful and multiply" needs to be balanced against Scripture calling for stewardship of the Earth.

Europe's rates diving

Increasingly, "a casual attitude toward global warming ought to be viewed as a sin," argues James Nash, director of the Churches' Center for Theology and Public Policy, a Washington-based research group that studies the relationship between Christian faith and public policy.

The appeal to have fewer children sounds a bit odd in Europe, where one of the biggest worries these days is plunging birthrates. German women today bear an average of 1.3 children, fewer than women in China, where the one-child policy is fast weakening. Even British women are giving birth to just 1.9 children on average, a level below that needed to

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produce a stable population.

But each child born in a rich country like Britain or the United States is likely to be responsible for 160 times as much carbon emitted as a child born in Ethiopia, said John Guillebaud, a British family-planning doctor, professor and one of the authors of the British Medical Journal editorial. With efforts to cut emissions likely to go only so far, cutting births may be the best option, he said.

"We're not Big Brother. We're not for pushing people," he insisted in an interview. "We just think deciding how big a family to have should take into consideration our descendants."

At the current projected rates of growth, the world's population, now at 6.7 billion, is expected to reach about 9 billion by 2050. Environmentalists argue that a population that large will dramatically overtax the world's resources and lead to growing conflict as well as potentially crippling climate change, particularly as poorer parts of the world develop and begin using more resources.

Most of the expected growth in population is projected to come in less-developed parts of the world, particularly Asia, where 60 percent of the world's people live, and Africa, where birthrates are the highest in the world.

Worldwide, population growth is declining, and even in much of Asia and Africa "the drop in fertility rate has been quite amazing," said Werner Haug, director of the United Nations Population Fund's technical division. Despite falling international investment in family planning, Thailand today has a European-like birthrate; Kenyan women, who once averaged eight children, are now having five.

Overall, Asia's birthrate, excluding China, is 2.8 children per woman, and Africa's is 5.4—well down from the past, said Carl Haub of the Washington-based Population Reference Bureau, an independent organization that analyzes demographic data.

Asia set for boom

But because a birthrate above 2.1 children per couple — the approximate replacement level, allowing for some untimely deaths—will produce ever-expanding growth, even Asia is still set to "grow like wildfire," Haub said.

The problem is worst in places such as northern India, where literacy, education and access to birth control are poor and poverty levels and population numbers are already high. If those conditions continue, runaway growth could push India toward a population of 2 billion people, Haub said. Sub-Saharan Africa, at expected growth rates, is likely to nearly triple its population by 2050, also to about 2 billion people, he said.

Even in the United States, birthrates, which had fallen to around 1.85 children per non-Hispanic white woman, are now about 2.1 children per U.S. couple, thanks to Hispanic migration.

In a nation where Texas' 23 million people account for more greenhouse gas emissions than all 720 million Sub-Saharan Africans, even small rates of U.S. population growth may have a disproportionate impact on global warming, said the UN's Haug.

Experts say the best way to cut the world's birthrate is simply to push ahead with what has

worked best in the past: education, access to information about birth-control options, and better health care to give parents confidence that children born will survive to adulthood.

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