

# Is having children bad for the planet?

With today's newborns facing ecological catastrophe within decades, many people now believe that the best thing they can do for their future offspring is not to have them at all

John Gibbons • Sat, Sep 3, 2016, 04:00



One of the biggest decisions any of us will ever face is whether to become a parent. While, for women, bearing children was until recently almost a foregone conclusion, today in Ireland one in five women, either by choice or circumstance, will never become mothers.

The drive to reproduce is as ancient as it is powerful, but it can become derailed, in humans as in other species, in situations of extreme stress. Birthrates have plummeted in Greece since its economic crash, for example, and this also happened during the Great Depression, in the US after 1929.

More modest but marked declines in fertility rates have been measured since 2009 across most of Europe, the US and Australia as widespread

anxiety about the future caused people to postpone or abandon plans to start families.

A far longer shadow now stretches over our collective future. Children born in 2016 will still be in their early 30s by midcentury and likely by then to be facing their own decisions about parenthood. For those paying attention to environmental science 2050 has a deeply ominous ring.

Atmospheric carbon-dioxide levels will by then have more than doubled since preindustrial times, on current trends, locking in dangerous climate change for millennia. And acidification, pollution and overfishing are on track to have rendered much of the world's oceans almost lifeless in the same timeframe.

Between 1970 and 2010 the total number of vertebrate wild animals on Earth declined by an astonishing 52 per cent, according to the World Wildlife Fund. It is no coincidence that as the natural world went into freefall human numbers exploded, increasing by 3.1 billion in the same 40-year period.

If half of the volume of the world's wild animals has been wiped out in 40 years, what can we expect to happen to the remainder between now and 2050, when the human population is predicted to expand to well over nine billion, requiring another doubling of agricultural output and water use as more people adopt western diets and consumer habits?

The answer to this question will play out against a backdrop of rising temperatures, ever-increasing weather extremes and sea-level encroachment.

Ironically, among the species most vulnerable to human activities are those – including bees, bats and birds – that provide the natural pollination services upon which between a third and a half of all our food production depends. Wiping out nature is arguably humanity's most spectacular own goal yet.

Today's babies face a daunting panoply of converging resource and

ecological crises as they become young adults in the next couple of decades. Unsurprisingly, some people are beginning to think again about reproducing.

In 2014, for example, the initiative [conceivablefuture.org](http://conceivablefuture.org) was launched in the US. "The climate crisis is a reproductive crisis . . . As we consider having families, it becomes clear that the perils of climate change have made this a terrifying time to make such choices. We now have to worry that the planet won't support our children," says its manifesto.

In the era of climate change and global ecological contraction, a growing number of people are coming to believe that the best thing they can do for their future children is not to have them in the first place. As the retired Nasa chief Dr James Hansen said recently, "We're in danger of handing young people a situation that's out of their control."

The US meteorologist Eric Holthaus put it more bluntly: "Why the hell would someone of procreating age today even consider having a baby? It feels like an utter tragedy to create new life, fall in love with it and then watch it writhe in agony as the world sings to a crisp."

As if to answer his own question he recently became a father for the first time – an act as much, perhaps, of defiance as of hope. Suffering from acute anxiety, as is now widespread among climate scientists and activists, Holthaus added: "Our baby has brought us back from the brink. It's impossible to be hopeless with a newborn."

A new word, *solastalgia*, has been coined to describe a profound sense of loss for the ongoing loss of the natural world and the contemplation of its total destruction. The realisation that the very real gains in human welfare in the past century and more have been secured as a result of a Faustian bargain with nature is profoundly disconcerting.

And me? I have two children, many fears, but no regrets. Becoming a parent almost 14 years ago forced me to contemplate time spans beyond my own lifetime, and this was the spark for a fraught journey into

environmental journalism and lobbying. In the words of the writer Alice Walker, activism is the rent we pay for living on the planet.

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