
An ageing population is good for us and the planet

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Western society should embrace ageing and declining population growth, argue ecologists in a new scientific opinion article.

A smaller population can create a more sustainable society, and the costs associated with the world's ageing population are manageable. That is according to ecologists writing in a new [opinion article](#) [6] in the scientific journal *Trends in Ecology and Evolution*.

"As the nations of the world grapple with the task of creating sustainable societies, ending and in some cases reversing population growth will be necessary to succeed. Yet stable or declining populations are typically reported in the media as a problem, or even a crisis, due to demographic ageing," writes ecologist Frank Götmark from Gothenburg University, Sweden, along with co-authors from the US and Australia, in the article.

"Endless population growth would be ecologically impossible," says Götmark in a press release published at [phys.org](#) [7] and [ScienceDaily](#) [8].

"Overpopulation leads to serious problems, including excessive consumption, deadly conflicts over scarce resources, and habitat loss leading to species endangerment," he says.

The UN population report from 2017 shows that 14 per cent of countries in the world have a declining population, including Japan, the Czech Republic and Estonia. And they estimate that 32 per cent of all countries will have decreasing populations by 2050, according to the press release.

The social benefits of an ageing society

Götmark and co-authors found no evidence that an ageing population leads to labour shortages. In fact, they report that it could have benefits for individual workers. Among the benefits of an ageing, shrinking population, the new article lists:

1. Rising wages for workers and higher wealth per capita
2. Less crowding and reduced stress in populated areas
3. Greater protection of green spaces and improved quality of life

An ageing population will need more healthcare, which could cost more. But, the researchers suggest that this increasing cost is manageable and that societies should initiate more preventive healthcare measures to reduce future expenses, according to the press release.

"[T]he problems associated with ageing societies are both overstated and manageable," writes Götmark and his co-authors in the article. The social, economic, and environmental benefits associated with stable or even declining populations, more than compensate for the economic costs of supporting an ageing population, they write.

"Earth's human-carrying capacity has been exceeded; hence, population growth must end and ageing societies are unavoidable. They should be embraced as part of a just and prosperous future for people and the other species with whom we share our planet," they write.

Read More: [Professor: we must tackle population growth with knowledge](#)[9]

Older, but fitter

Arild Angelsen is a professor of Environmental and Development Economics at the Norwegian University of Life Sciences, (NMBU). He thinks that the new opinion piece raises several good points.

"The idea that care of older people is a burden is a little misleading. The population is getting older, it's true, but people have to recognise that older people are fitter than before," he says.

Started in 1974, 'The Tromsø Study' is Norway's most comprehensive population survey. It shows that people in their 80s are today as strong as the previous generation's 75-year-olds.

The Tromsø Study is led by the Norwegian Institute of Public Health, in cooperation with researchers from The Arctic University of Norway-UiT, OsloMet, and University College London, among others.

Increasing health costs

Angelsen agrees that increased health and pension costs associated with an older, smaller population, are a minor disadvantage when compared to the bigger picture.

"If there is a country that can withstand higher pension costs, it is certainly Norway," he says.

There is, however, no doubt that an ageing population will mean higher health and pension expenses, requiring more nursing and care.

Read More: [How does Denmark have better healthcare than the US for less money?](#)[10]

A step in the right direction

A stable or declining population is good for the climate. It means lower CO₂ emissions, less energy consumption, less trash, and less human pressure on the environment.

"We can't just look for technological solutions to the climate problem, we also have to consider human activity. If for various reasons the population stabilises or declines naturally, we should applaud this, from an environmental perspective," says Angelsen.

However, building a global consensus around population decline is complicated. Many developing countries, particularly in Africa and Asia have large and growing populations. Meanwhile, Western countries have much higher CO₂ emissions per capita.

"There are many things that can reduce CO₂ emissions. A stable or declining population will not solve the climate problem on its own, but it is certainly a step in the right direction," says Angelsen.

[Read more in the Norwegian version of this article at forskning.no](#)[11]

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[Götmark et al. Aging Human Populations: Good for Us, Good for the Earth, Trends in Ecology and Evolution \(2018\). <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tree.2018.08.015> \[6\]](#)

[Nancy Bazilchuk \[21\]](#) [based on an article by Karoline Spanthus Bjørnfeldt \[22\]](#)

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