

Some good news about the environment

- Shreya Aiyer

Ever since the 1960s when the environmental movement kicked off, we've been very good at telling people how the planet is growing so much worse. This *can* be good, since most people now are at least aware of the issues facing the environment - but it is also a great disservice. Thanks to the targeted spread of information about things going wrong, we often lose a sense of whether anything is going right. It's a little too easy to find endless content on how we've destroyed our planet and ecosystem for all eternity. Even though people have been trying to fix things for a good bit, it never feels like anything is getting better. So here's a couple of things about the environment that *are*.

First, overpopulation. It's a widespread concern, and perhaps rightly so. Mental images of people in ravenous crowds, unable to move without stepping on each other's toes, all eating and breathing and taking up all the resources the world has - it's not a comforting thought. Mass extinctions. Global hunger. Poverty. All outcomes of having too many human mouths to feed, and too little to go around. According to the [UN's World Population Prospects 2019](#), the world's population is expected to increase by 2 billion in the next 30 years, from 7.7 billion currently to 9.7 billion in 2050. In fact, the population is supposed to reach 11 billion by the turn of the century.

We're practically on the brink of an overpopulated, disaster of a planet.

But when you look at the figures a little more closely, things get interesting. According to [Gapminder](#), the number of babies born per woman has been *reducing* - from 6 babies in 1800, to 5 in 1955, to only 2.5 in recent times. Better yet, it's projected to drop further. There are about 2.2 billion children in the world at the moment, and the number of children in 2100 is not expected to increase.

How has this dramatic change in birth rates taken place?

In the past few decades, billions of people have left extreme poverty. As a result, they no longer need more children as an insurance against high child mortality rates, or to work to bring in additional income. And as people accessed better education, they realised that they wanted their children to be better educated and better fed - and having fewer children was the obvious solution. Women gaining greater access to education has resulted in fewer child marriages, better understanding and use of contraception, and thus, fewer children.

So if more people are not being born, where are all the additional bodies adding to the total population count going to come from? The answer - existing children will simply grow up. The 2.2 billion children now will grow to become 2.2 billion adults, and 2.2 billion old people. Hans Rosling refers to this as the "fill up" effect in his book 'Factfulness', and it is expected to last about three generations. Due to the projected increase in life expectancy, there is also expected to be 1 billion more old people. And then, the curve will flatten.

Whether the world will be an overpopulated hell by then does depend on us. But there is a slight comfort in knowing that the growth of population is not permanently exponential. The number of people on the planet will stop growing without any intervention. Living sustainably from a population standpoint is a *solvable* problem. And better yet, this population will also be better educated, and better equipped to handle the problems it will inevitably face.

Moving on to deforestation. As any student well versed in CBSE will attest, it's a pretty big issue. Fewer forests, lesser carbon dioxide recycling, more global warming. Not to mention the extensive loss of habitat and biodiversity that loss of forests causes.

But here's a couple of things that are working.

The UN has [unveiled plans](#) to plant urban forests four times the size of Hong Kong in cities across Asia and Africa, with the initial plan to support 90 cities in 30 countries to create green areas. India set records in 2017, planting [66 million trees in 12 hours](#) in Madhya Pradesh. *Drones* are even planting trees in Myanmar. The drones pick the best location to plant trees, and then fire a seed into the ground. Two people with 10 drones can plant an incredible [400,000 trees a day](#), according to the organisation Worldview Impact that has been working with drone planting.

The [Great Green Wall](#) - one of my favourite initiatives - is an African led movement started in 2007. It aims to grow 8000 km of vegetation across the width of Africa. Once complete, it will be the *largest* living structure in the world, *3 times* the size of the Great Barrier Reef. At present it stands about 15% completed. It is taking root in the Sahel region of Africa, which is one of the poorest places on the planet. According to the Great Green Wall website, it is "bringing improved food security, jobs and stability to people's lives.", and will make a significant contribution to the UN's sustainable development goals.

Within forests, there's also the matter of endangered species, and the countless missions - Save the Tigers, Save the Rhinos, Save the Pandas - dedicated to preventing the 'sixth mass extinction'. But has there been any success?

Though tigers face huge pressures from hunting and habitat encroachment, tiger numbers have made a remarkable comeback. From the 2010 estimate of 3,200, numbers have gone up to about [3,900 tigers in 2016](#). The numbers have come primarily from new surveys in India, Russia, Nepal, Bangladesh and Bhutan. The mark of 3,900 tigers is the halfway point of the [Tx2](#) - a project set by the governments of 13 tiger range countries to double the population of tigers in the wild by 2022. Interestingly, the WWF website for the Tx2 project emphasises that they are not 'saving the tigers' - "Tx2 uses a strategic, long-term approach", which is a much more efficient strategy than saving individual animals at a state or country level .

Giant Pandas were classified as endangered in 1996. But as of 2015, it's status has moved to the safer vulnerable, according to the [IUCN Red List](#). In 2020, IUCN even reported that there is "cautious

hope” for African Black Rhinos, whose numbers in the wild have grown from [4,845 to 5,630](#) between 2012 and 2018.

The Manatee, Grey wolf, Grey whale, Snow Leopard, Humpback whale, Steller Sea Lion, Yellowstone Grizzly bear, Red Kangaroo, Southern white rhinoceros, Arabian oryx (that was incidentally once reported extinct) - these are a few of the species that have bounced back and are no longer classified as endangered. Across the world, efforts being taken to preserve wildlife and biodiversity are *working*.

It's no secret that the environment has been 'suffering' - it's one of those evergreen news pieces that you can never escape, if only because there is some truth in them. But once in a while, we must see whether the efforts being taken are really helping. We have to look at the results, and if they are good, we can give ourselves a pat on the back before plunging back into conservation efforts and campaigns.

Things can be bad, yes - but they can also be getting better.