

Global warming is back, although there is conflicting evidence about whether the globe is actually warming in any significant measure. No matter. In December in Kyoto, the industrial nations of the world will meet under United Nations auspices. Their mission: restraining the increase of the so-called greenhouse gases that cause the global temperature to rise.

How do the greenhouse gases get into the atmosphere to do their warming? The long answer is long. The short answer is that some are of natural origin and some are caused by people, who, among other things, drive automobiles, heat their homes, and raise cows that go poof! (releasing Methane gas).

Insofar as people do it, it is important to estimate how many people there will be on the planet in the future. And not just to prevent global warming. After all, population alarmists have been telling us for decades that population increase erodes per-capita economic growth, poisons the planet, causes overcrowding, gobbles up nonrenewable resources, strains renewable resources, incites war, yields hunger and so on.

The United Nations publishes an extensive array of population data. Their most recent major demographic publication is called "World Population Prospects: The 1996 Revision." It is, in many ways, a most admirable work of statistics. It contains the best available current data for each of 184 countries, from Afghanistan to Zimbabwe.

The volume also provides population projections going out to the year 2050. Linked U.N. data offers global projections to 2200. And there's the rub. The United Nations has presented data that is misleading, quite possibly adding 3 billion extra people, or more, to the totals. The folks in Kyoto ought to understand this before they start calculating how and by how much we humans ought to scale back our liv-

Population data that doesn't compute

ing standards to meet the alleged greenhouse threat.

At the root of the problem is what's happening on the ground, in the bedroom and in the obstetric ward. Never before in history have birth rates and fertility rates fallen so low, for so long, in so many places all around the world.

In the last decade the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) for Europe has plunged by 21 percent, down from already incredibly low levels, to 1.45 children per woman. (It takes 2.1 children per woman to merely keep a population stable over time.) The Italian fertility rate is down to 1.2 children per woman, the lowest in the world and the lowest in the history of the world. Japan is at 1.5. The U.S. rate has declined in each of the last six years, to an estimated 1.98, not very far from the all-time low level of the 1970s.

Most important is what has happened in the developing countries, often called the Less Developed Countries (LDCs). In the last 30 years, the aggregate rate of the LDCs has plunged from 6.0 to 3.1 children per woman — with the most dramatic drop occurring since 1990.

The United Nations publishes three sets of population projections, labeled "high variant," "low variant" and "medium variant." Naturally enough, it is the "medium variant" that is used most frequently. It is the one that forms the basis for

the central demographic assumption for the Kyoto conference. Erroneously, the "medium variant" is regarded as the "most likely" variant. It isn't.

Current world population is about 5.8 billion people. The U.N. medium projection puts the global population of 2050 at 9.4 billion people — a 62 percent increase. And it predicts it will climb to 10.7 billion just after the year 2200 — an increase of 84 percent. The actual figure used most often in the calculations of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change is a World Bank projection (based on U.N. data) of 11.3 billion by 2100 — an increase of 95 percent.

These projections are much overstated. The assumptions used in the "medium variant" projections are off the wall. Countries and regions with below-replacement fertility are automatically taken up to 2.1 children per woman. Thus, Europe's TFR soars from 1.45 to 2.0 by 2050, an increase of 38 percent. How can that be "medium" when European fertility rates are still falling?

Conversely, the rates for the LDCs are taken down to 2.1 but no further. This too is preposterous. There are already 27 LDCs with below-replacement fertility, including China, the world's most populous country, at 1.8 and falling. The rate for India, the second-most-populous nation, has fallen about half way to replacement level in just the last 10 years, from 4.07 to 3.07 children per woman.

Many leading demographers believe that global population will top off at about 8 billion or 9 billion toward the middle of the coming century, not 10.7 billion or 11.3 billion — and then decline. Yes, decline. Decline.

What a difference! In the number of people, and in the amount of greenhouse gases. Will the Kyoto environmentalists be using bum data?

Ben J. Wattenberg is a nationally syndicated columnist.