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Recurring specters of the Malthusians

For the past few weeks, we have been subjected to an assortment of population gloom-and-doomers who believe that all the world's problems are derived from too many people.

These are the new Malthusians who predict that population growth will lead to every ill imaginable — from global starvation to the end of the world's natural resources.

Like seven-year locusts, their catastrophic predictions reappear every decade or so, spawning a spate of hysterical books preaching the end of the Earth, while raking in millions of dollars for their organizations with their fear-mongering.

The world population conference in Cairo gave these end-of-the-worlders a new soap box to preach from and their apocalyptic views have been repeated without question by the hairspray set on the nightly network news.

There's just one thing wrong with these dire predictions: They are always wrong. We are not running out of food. We have a worldwide food surplus. We will never run out of resources because, as Dr. Julian Simon says, "Knowledge is an inexhaustible resource." And the world is definitely not overpopulated.

First, there is absolutely no relationship between population and poverty. Countries with the sparsest populations can be the most impoverished while those with the highest population density can be the most prosperous.

Hong Kong, with 247,000 people per square mile, is one of the richest and most successful economies in the world. Singapore has 34,185 people per square mile yet it has virtually no crime, hunger or unemployment.

But a country like the Sudan, where the population density is 25

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people per square mile, is one of the most impoverished nations in the world, with a per capita income of only \$420 a year.

Clearly, population density has nothing to do with any of the problems that the doom and gloomers were decrying in Cairo. But a country's economic system has everything to do with it.

Hong Kong is the ultimate example of a free economy. Taxes are low, labor is plentiful, government regulations are at a minimum and its citizens enjoy the benefits of entrepreneurial capitalism: economic opportunity, full employment and unimpeded access to the marketplace.

On the other hand, some of the world's most sparsely populated countries are engulfed in poverty. The chief reasons: They suffer from

comparatively high per capita tax rates and mindless economic regulations that inhibit free trade, investment and commerce.

Second, there is no "population bomb" ready to explode, as the network news shows reported last week.

Such fear-filled forecasts grew out of the 1960s and 1970s when the global population was growing at about 2 percent a year. Population forecasters like Paul Ehrlich predicted that at this rate there would be 60 million billion people on earth in 900 years, or one person for every square yard.

But such predictions were based on static analysis that does not factor in what happens when a country becomes more industrialized, urbanized, educated and its citizens seek upward mobility: The birth rate drops dramatically.

And this is exactly what has been happening, say the authors of a brilliant book called "Eco-Sanity — a Common-Sense Guide to Environmentalism," just published by Madison Books. "The world's population growth rate slowed to 1.75 percent per year during the 1980s, and is now expected to drop to 1.0 percent by the year 2025."

"Even a 1 percent annual growth rate means the world's population would double every 70 years," they say. "But the news gets even better. The United Nations, the World Bank, the U.S. Bureau of the Census, and the Population Reference Bureau all now predict that world

population will stop growing altogether in approximately 100 years."

Third, the world is nowhere near the resource-devouring, "teeming masses" image conjured up by the scarecasters at the World Resources Institute.

Hoover Institution scholar Thomas Sowell published a demystifying analysis of the world's population trends in 1983 that put the overpopulation myth to rest once and for all — or so I thought.

Mr. Sowell took the world's population, then about 4.4 billion, and found that you could put everyone on Earth into the state of Texas in typical middle class, one-story, single-family homes, four persons to a house with a front yard and a backyard. Today there might be some spillover into Oklahoma.

Or consider this equally stunning statistic: The authors of "Eco-Sanity" say that everyone in the world today "could all stand inside the city limits of Jacksonville, Fla. — an area less than 0.03 percent the size of the United States."

Even "if the world's population doubles before finally stabilizing at 10 billion or 12 billion, human settlements will still cover less than 2 percent of the Earth's land areas," they note.

Whatever the findings of the Cairo conference, it should not frighten us into thinking that the Earth is in any danger of being overpopulated. The world is still a very large place of great abundance that offers economic opportunity and prosperity when we give people the freedom to pursue their dreams.

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