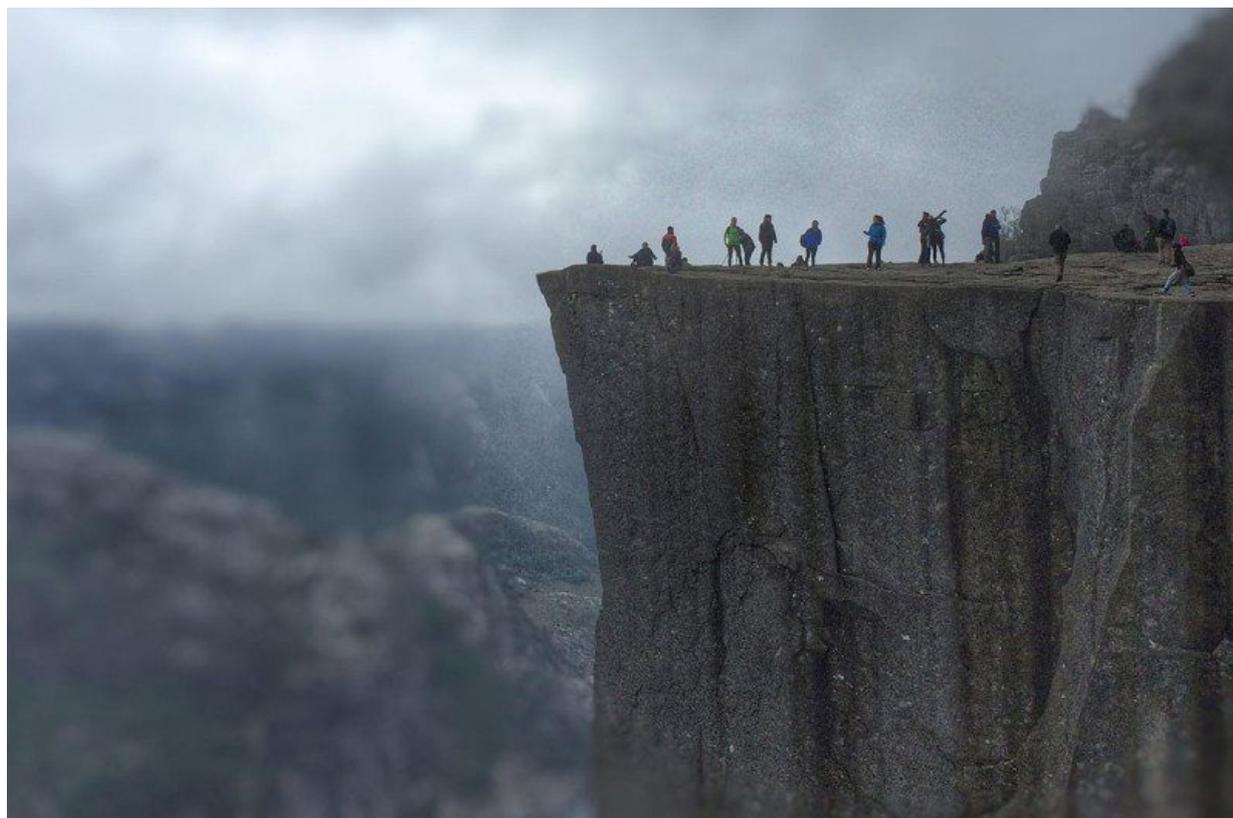


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The world in 2076: The population bomb has imploded



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By **Fred Pearce**

Could the population bomb be about to go off in the most unexpected way? Rather than a Malthusian meltdown, could we instead be on the verge of a demographic implosion?

To find out how and why, go to Japan, where a recent survey found that people are giving up on sex. Despite a life expectancy of 85 and rising, the number of Japanese is falling thanks to a fertility rate of just 1.4 children per woman, and a reported epidemic of virginity. The population, it seems, are too busy (and too shy) to procreate.

It's catching. Half the world's nations have fertility rates below the replacement level of just over two children per woman. Countries across Europe and the Far East are teetering on a demographic cliff, with rates below 1.5. On recent trends, Germany and Italy could see their populations halve within the next 60 years.

The world has hit peak child, says Hans Rosling at the Karolinska Institute in Stockholm, Sweden. Peak person cannot be far behind.

For now, the world's population continues to rise. From today's 7.4 billion people, we might reach 9 billion or so, mostly because of high fertility in Africa. The UN predicts a continuing upward trend, with population reaching around 11.2 billion in 2100. But this seems unlikely. After hitting the demographic doldrums, no country yet has seen its fertility recover. Many demographers expect a global crash to be under way by 2076.

Governments may try to halt the fall – though Singapore has been trying for a generation and still has the world's lowest fertility rate at 0.8. And once the number of fertile women starts to decline, reversing the trend will be very hard. The population boom will turn to bust.

What will this mean for the future of our species? By 2076, children will be rarities. For the first time in history most of us will be old. The brash, hormone-driven cultures that shaped the 20th century seem doomed. Innovation could dry up.

It could trash our economies, too. Some economists say that Japan's repeated recessions since the 1990s are due to the burden of ever more oldies. Maybe Europe is going the same way. China could be next, as its population is set to peak in about 2030. Demographic determinists fear our species is on a slow downward spiral. We could go out not with a demographic bang but with an incontinent whimper.

Yet it may not be like that. A grey society will certainly be different. But perhaps, like today's ageing rock stars, we will find that being old isn't so bad. Old could be the new young. And older societies are less prone to taking up arms. A world with fewer of us would also give the planet's ecosystems a break. Malthus would be off the agenda. Instead, ecologist Edward O. Wilson's call for a century of ecological restoration could take wing. Nature, at least, would enjoy the silver lining.

