

An interview with John Guillebaud

John Guillebaud (pronounced “GIL-BOE”), Emeritus Professor of Family Planning and Reproductive Health, University College London (UCL), in 1993 became the first clinical professor in the world with that title. He is the author/co-author of 300 publications, including nine books available in 10 languages. Dr Guillebaud is the creator of the 1994 Environment Time Capsule (Eco-TC) project www.ecotimecapsule.com

When and how did you get into the specialty of contraceptive technology, for both genders?

While still a medical student, an optional lecture was my first alert to the dire environmental risks of the population ‘explosion’. It changed my life. I learnt that my profession, by dramatically reducing death-rates while birth-rates remained high, bears sadly some responsibility – unintendedly – for the increase: one billion in the early 1800s, 3 billion then (1959)**, and no limit in sight. Now alarmed about the future of all life on the finite planet, restoring balance through contra-ception therefore seemed my obvious career path. In due course this led to higher degrees in surgery and gynaecology, about 4000 vasectomies and a similar number of women’s fertility-regulating procedures, plus ongoing reproductive health research and training.

[**The number looming in 2021 is 8 billion].

What provoked you to making that Apology - saying “sorry” to the Future - by the burying of environment time capsules? My increasing anxiety about the future of life on earth, after more than 30 years of my population and environmental activism, reinforced by 3 statements in 1992:

First, the **World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity** had been signed by over half the living Nobel Laureates

“The earth is finite. Its ability to absorb wastes and destructive effluent is finite. Its ability to provide food and energy is finite....Pressures resulting from unrestrained population growth [Then: 5.4 billion] put demands on the natural world that can overwhelm any efforts to achieve a sustainable future.... We must accept limits to that growth”. [A reiteration of this, the **Second Scientists’ Warning to Humanity**, was signed in

2017] <https://academic.oup.com/bioscience/article/67/12/1026/4605229>

Also in 1992, Maurice Strong, secretary general of the UN’s Earth Summit in Rio, posed the stark choice: either we stabilize the world’s population, voluntarily, “or if we do not do it, Nature will, and much more brutally.”

In a third quote that year James Grant said, more positively:

Family planning “could bring more benefits to more people at less cost than any other single technology now available to the human race.” (UNICEF, 1992)

He went on, importantly: "*it is not appreciated widely enough that this would still be true if there were no such thing as a population problem*" since it is **preventive medicine**, a humanitarian intervention. Maternal mortality remains stubbornly high, worldwide, through disregard for the truism that *you cannot die from a pregnancy you don't have* – through having had the choice not to conceive it. Those 1992 statements together triggered my ongoing Apology to the Future project, based on the saying:

We have not inherited the earth from our grandparents, we have borrowed it from our grandchildren www.ecotimecapsule.com

What were they and what did they hold, these environment time capsules (Eco-TCs)?

Delivering a **Warning**, an **Apology** and a **Promise**, Eco-TCs were buried in the Botanic Gardens of Kew, Ness, South Africa, Seychelles, Sydney NSW and Mexico.

The Eco-TCs were buried on or about World Environment Day in June 1994, and will be disinterred in 2044

(ie after exactly 50 years by our 'grandchildren'). They contain relevant 20th century artefacts labelled BAD [eg some fossil fuel and a CFC aerosol] or GOOD [my own cycle pump and - of course - a pack of contraceptive Pills...], along with 'official' and unofficial letters of Apology, and entries by hundreds of schoolchildren in a nation-wide competition for the best letters, poems and pictures that apologised for the anticipated damage to our grandchildren's 'loan' to us.

These ALSO pledged action: such that hopefully the word 'sorry' might never be needed!

Please see/hear and forward Christopher Guillebaud's video which "encapsulates" all this, and more, at www.ecotimecapsule.com .

But why is voluntary family planning/contraception SO vital for planet earth?

In 1971 Paul Ehrlich (author of *The Population Bomb*) and the renowned environmental scientist John Holdren devised a fundamental environmental equation which brings together the only 3 factors causing human-induced eco-damage or Impact (I) to the planet:

- 1 Per-person Affluence (A) - intrinsic to which, always, is Effluence (Pollution, above all by greenhouse gases leading to the climate emergency) and renewable or non-renewable Resource consumption
- 2 Per-person Technology factor (T) – its 'green-ness' or otherwise – a concept which is as real as its accurate measurement is challenging and
- 3 Population (P), the number of persons, which can be seen as the "upstream" causative factor, having increased 7-fold since 1850 and still rising by > 80 million pa, or > 1 million every 4 days.

These factors multiply together, such that: **I = P x A x T**

UCL Professor Chris Rapley highlights the climatic relevance of that P-factor in another truism: "an absent human has a zero carbon footprint"..... absent by non-birth, because of the accessibility of voluntary contra-ceptive care to the potential parents! Hence although it is essential for all humans to minimise their

(carbon) footprints, this will not suffice without addressing (always wisely and compassionately) the number of feet....

Though it is hardly rocket science to see population growth as being the “driver” of human-induced climate disruption and biodiversity carnage, intervening in human reproduction raises intensely personal issues and has become fraught, with many taboos. This has led to the persistent myth that *any quantitative concern about human numbers must be, intrinsically, coercive*, inducing accusations of racism and the like.

How therefore should contraception be delivered, to women - or men?

First, how not? Never with a hint of compulsion, however anxious leaders may become. There have been disgraceful aspects of programs historically run by population “zealots” (eg in India in the mid 1970s, in China after 1980).

<> **Coercion is abhorrent - and also unnecessary.** Since the mid-20th century numerous countries have experienced TFRs (total fertility rates or “average family sizes”) reducing from above 5 to replacement fertility, through nothing more than removing certain barriers to communities’ needs. This demolishes the myth that compulsion is required. How can it be coercive, to remove barriers that are preventing people from accessing something they want?!

<> **Has the voluntary approach worked in the past?** Yes, whenever the barriers to women’s choice of contraception are removed it gets used. Sexual and reproductive health (SRH) care is optimal IF it is *rights-based* and removes well-known barriers to voluntary family planning [VFP], while simultaneously achieving full gender equity, especially in education. The many barriers may be both tangible (contraceptives unavailable) and intangible (cultural, religious and mis-informational), impeding women’s choice to access family planning. Education should be via both schools and media, as promoted and provided by www.populationmedia.org

<> **How impactful might this approach be in future, through there being fewer “climate changERS” ie the total of human emitters of greenhouse gases?** The answer is ‘very’: **Project Drawdown** recently demonstrated the potentially massive reduction in world GHG emissions achievable by increasing women’s access to education plus VFP within women’s health.

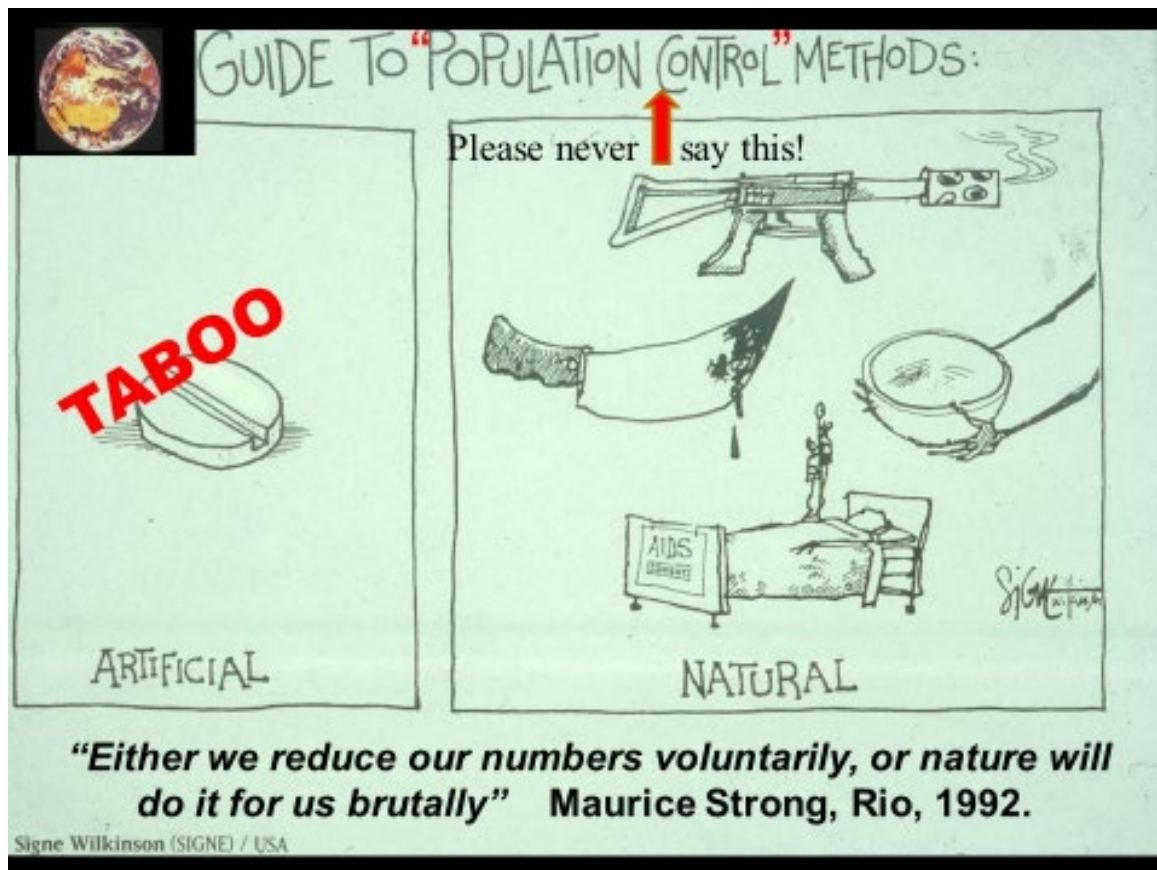
<https://drawdown.org/solutions/health-and-education>

<> **Do you see this as substituting for other interventions for the climate emergency?** No way. The primary, quicker-acting, objective remains to keep fossil fuels in the ground. Yet, proper resourcing of world contraception-care services (eg increasing them to at least 2 % from the current derisory 1 % of international Aid) is an important ADDITIONAL climatic intervention.

<> **Won’t highlighting population and VFP make affluent individuals (in all nations) comply less in reducing consumption?** Though often said this is not obligatory. Why shouldn’t affluent individuals gain the insight to reduce their fossil energy consumption and moreover see logic in planning a small family themselves (given the far greater lifetime GHG emissions by high consumers’ children) – and yet ALSO advocate for better contraception care worldwide?

<> **Don’t some people ‘victim-blame’ couples in least developed countries for their currently high birth-rates, while they suffer most from**

climate change and also have the lowest per-person GHG emissions? That is horrendous! Yet how can it be blaming anyone to advocate for better resourcing of contraception care? It meets a need expressed by women themselves to control their fertility (an estimated 270 million from recent survey data). Furthermore climate justice requires the poor to escape poverty through their per-person emissions actually increasing in the short term, obviously meaning that fewer children, through better rights-based contraception care, in *currently* low-consuming settings means fewer significant GHG-emitters in the future.



So how do you sign off this blog?

It gives us zero pleasure to be proved right, in our warnings expressed in the eco-TCs. There are, sadly, probably more than enough humans already here, to comprehensively trash this fragile and beautiful planet before the end of this century, through climate change and the collapse of biodiversity. What is totally unavoidable and certain is an eventual return to sustainability, see Figure. The only question is how? Even in the ghastly worst-case “perfect storm” scenarios, birth reduction through access to contraception care does not lose its urgency. If billions of humans are to die prematurely, along with much non-human life, in the looming dystopia of mega-hurricanes, floods, fires, famines, pandemics, wars and societal collapse of the later decades of this century, it transforms into a valuable measure of last resort: to reduce suffering.

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John Guillebaud