

Population aging and decrease may have socioeconomic and environmental benefits

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Environmental scientists argue that societies should embrace population aging and decrease in an opinion appearing October 16 in the journal *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*. They cite multiple reports of the

socioeconomic and environmental benefits of population aging, mortality-related decrease, and shrinking workforces due to retirement and maintain that, contrary to some economic analyses, costs associated with aging societies are manageable, while smaller populations make for more sustainable societies.

"In many countries, stable and declining populations due to demographic aging are often reported by the media as a problem or crisis," says Frank Götmark, co-senior author and biologist at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. "But the alternative—endless [population](#) growth—is not ecologically possible. Overpopulation leads to serious problems, including excessive consumption, deadly conflicts over scarce resources, and habitat loss leading to species endangerment."

The United Nations' population report from 2017 states that 14 percent of countries currently have declining populations, including Japan, Estonia, and the Czech Republic. The report projects that 32% of countries will have shrinking populations by 2050. But aging and decreasing populations may have social benefits. Götmark and his co-authors cite Japanese economist Akihiko Matsutani as evidence that shrinking labor pools mean rising wages for individual workers and therefore greater wealth per capita. And smaller populations also mean less crowding, which can cut commute times, reduce stress, maintain green areas, and improve quality of life, according to Israeli environmentalist Alon Tal.

In countries with aging and declining populations, some fear societal challenges that come with population aging, but the authors contend that these fears are overstated. They found no evidence to support the popular belief that population aging leads to worker shortages. They acknowledge that healthcare spending does increase in aging populations, citing work from the National Bureau of Economic Research. But the authors suggest that this increase is manageable, and

they argue that societies should invest more in preventative care to reduce future age-related healthcare spending.

Increasing [population numbers](#) through policy measures appears to have only a small and temporary effect on the proportion of people 65 and older. Rather than fighting aging, the authors say that societies should allow their population numbers to ebb naturally or face environmental and social consequences, such as conflicts over resources.

"If we don't reverse overpopulation, what happens next will be a sad story," says Götmark. "We have to recognize that continued population growth is a global threat. Short-term economic concerns, while valid, cannot be prioritized over the long-term health of our environment and our societies."

More information: *Trends in Ecology & Evolution*, Götmark et al.: "Aging human populations: good for us, good for the earth" [www.cell.com/trends/ecology-ev ... 0169-5347\(18\)30208-8](http://www.cell.com/trends/ecology-ev ... 0169-5347(18)30208-8) , DOI: [10.1016/j.tree.2018.08.015](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tree.2018.08.015)

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