

Mayday 23: World Population Becomes More Urban Than Rural

22 May 2007

There's no big countdown billboard or sign in Times Square to denote it, but Wednesday, May 23, 2007, represents a major demographic shift, according to scientists from North Carolina State University and the University of Georgia: For the first time in human history, the earth's population will be more urban than rural.

Working with United Nations estimates that predict the world will be 51.3 percent urban by 2010, the researchers projected the May 23, 2007, transition day based on the average daily rural and urban population increases from 2005 to 2010. On that day, a predicted global urban population of 3,303,992,253 will exceed that of 3,303,866,404 rural people.

Though the date is highly symbolic, the researchers – Dr. Ron Wimberley, Distinguished Professor of Sociology at NC State; Dr. Libby Morris, director of the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Georgia; and Dr. Gregory Fulkerson, a sociologist at NC State – advise avoiding the urge to interpret this demographic transition to mean that the urban population has greater importance than the rural.

Urban and rural populations, they say, rely heavily on each other.

Cities refine and process rural goods for urban and rural consumers. But if either cities or rural areas had to sustain themselves without the other, Wimberley says, few would bet on the cities.

“As long as cities exist, they will need rural resources – including the rural people and communities that help provide urban necessities,” he said. “Clean air, water, food, fiber, forest products and minerals all have their sources in rural areas. Cities cannot stand alone; rural natural resources can. Cities must depend on rural resources.”

In the United States, the tipping point from a majority rural to a majority urban population came early in the late 1910s, the researchers say. Today, 21 percent of our country is rural although some states – Maine, Mississippi, Vermont, and West Virginia – are still majority rural. In North Carolina, a rural majority held until the late 1980s.

Although rural natural and social resources are necessary for urban people and places, the researchers say rural people do not fare well relative to their urban counterparts. Maps of U.S. quality-of-life conditions show that poverty and low education attainment are concentrated in rural areas – especially the rural South – where the nation's food, water and forest resources exist.

Over much of the globe, rural poverty is much worse than in the United States. Findings by the International Fund for Agricultural Development show that 1.2 billion of the world's people live on less than what a dollar a day can buy. Globally, three-fourths of these poor people live in rural areas.

The researchers add that, in addition to having a highly disproportionate share of the world's poverty, rural areas also get the urban garbage. In exchange for useable natural resources produced by rural people for urban dwellers, rural places receive the waste products – polluted air, contaminated water, and solid and hazardous wastes – discharged by those in cities.

Wimberley says that May 23, 2007, marks a “mayday” call for all concerned citizens of the world.

“So far, cities are getting whatever resource needs that can be had from rural areas,” he said. “But given global rural impoverishment, the rural-urban question for the future is not just what rural people and places can do for the world's new urban majority. Rather, what can the urban majority do for

poor rural people and the resources upon which cities depend for existence? The sustainable future of the new urban world may well depend upon the answer.”

Source: NC State University

APA citation: Mayday 23: World Population Becomes More Urban Than Rural (2007, May 22) retrieved 30 October 2020 from <https://phys.org/news/2007-05-mayday-world-population-urban-rural.html>

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