



What are the environmental implications of having children, asks **Simon Birch**

Is it ethical to have children?

How far are you prepared to go to do your bit for the planet? OK, so you buy FairTrade coffee, you've turned the thermostat in the living room down and you've even reluctantly cut the number of flights you take every year. But would you go as far as to make the decision that Katy Craven has taken? "I'm definitely never going to have children," she says. "If we're serious about cutting levels of consumption here in industrialised northern countries then we've simply got to stop making new consumers," explains Katy, 26, who as well as being an environmental activist works as a social worker with young people in care. "No matter how hard you try and live an ethical and low-impact lifestyle, just by having one child you're automatically doubling your environmental impact."

The decision whether or not to have children is clearly one which is very personal, and couples choose not to have children for as many reasons as there are designer buggies down at your local Mothercare. Whether it be religious, health, age or lifestyle reasons, couples have always been deciding not to bring another little person into the world. What is more recent, however, is the fact that environmental considerations are now being cited as reasons for people deciding not to have a family. An increasing number of people, albeit a tiny minority made up largely of environmental activists, are taking decisions like Katy's not to have children. They base this on the huge inequality in the use of resources between the industrial north and developing countries in the south. Put simply, a baby born in Bristol is over the period of its lifetime going to use up vastly more resources and have a far greater environmental impact than any baby born in Bangalore. "There are enough resources to feed everyone in the world but not enough to let everyone drive an S.U.V.," says Katy.

The environmental charity WWF has worked out that if everyone in the world were to consume natural resources and generate carbon dioxide at the rate we do in the UK, then we'd need three planets to support us. Mark Fisher not only agrees with Katy, but has gone one step further. "I had a vasectomy 18 months ago because I didn't want to add to the deteriorating environmental situation by bringing another person into the world," says Mark, 35, a health worker and environmental and political activist. "Plus the world's overpopulated anyway, with the current population of six billion set to hit nine billion by 2045."

Despite vowing that she'll never children of her own, Katy is keen to point out that she's not anti-children. "Personally I love children and if I do get the need to have a child then I'll try and adopt one as there are so many children in care desperate for a family," she says.

Katy and Mark's decisions not to have children for environmental and ethical reasons have been praised by Catherine Budgett-Meakin from the Population & Sustainability Network. "I think that their decision is very admirable," says Catherine. "The environmental impact and resource use in countries like the UK is so great that the fewer of us there are the better."

Of course not everyone who's genuinely aghast at the scale of the global environmental crisis would be prepared to follow Katy and Mark in their decision never to have children. Having just one child was what American environmentalist and author Bill McKibben called for in the late '90s in his groundbreaking book *Maybe One*. According to McKibben the planet won't be able to sustain its ever-increasing population. With the US gobbling up a huge slice of the earth's resources as its population grows, to avoid global catastrophe McKibben called for one parent families as a way to reduce America's birth-rate.

So what do UK environmental and development groups have to say on the subject? Well as it happens, not a lot. In the course of the research of this eco-worry it was virtually impossible to gain any comment from an environmental or development group on the issue of population, largely because nobody was willing to talk about the subject. "Since the term 'population' became increasingly tarnished by the brush of 'coercion' and 'control' during the 1980s it has remained politically sensitive," says Catherine Budgett-Meakin. In the absence of any debate on the issue from the mainstream environmental movement, the last word goes to Mark Fisher: "People need to think seriously about whether they need to bring more kids into a world full of children and one that faces an extremely perilous future."

If you have an eco-worry then send it to Simon at scbirch@compuserve.com or contact the ECRA office at the usual address.