

# Empty Planet Summary

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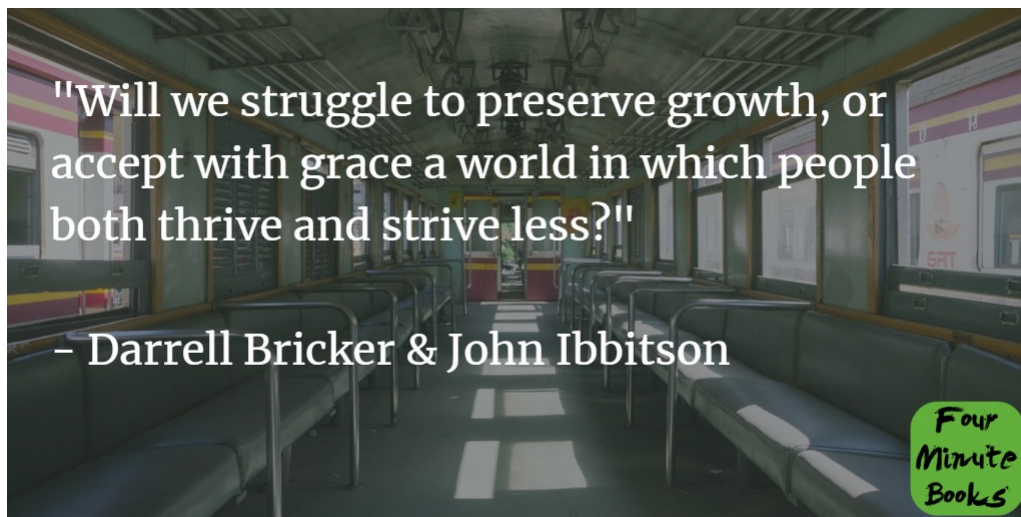


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**1-Sentence-Summary:** *Empty Planet* explains why overpopulation alarmists are wrong and how depopulation poses the more imminent threat to the happiness of humanity.

**Read in:** 4 minutes

**Favorite quote from the author:**



Have you ever sat in rush hour traffic or shopped for an apartment and thought: “wow, there are just too many people on this planet?” If so, you’re not alone. For hundreds of years, both professionals and regular people have worried about overpopulation.

It’s easy to imagine what might happen when the number of people on Earth swells. More individuals means more mouths to feed, roofs overhead, and trash. If we don’t reign our numbers in, worse forces like climate change, famine, or war will do it for us.

In contrast, it’s harder to see what might be challenging about a declining or stable but smaller population. *Empty Planet: The Shock of Global Population Decline* explores this question. Canadian authors Darrell Bricker and John Ibbitson argue that aging and low fertility will cause massive change to the human population, and sooner than we think.

These are my 3 favorite lessons from this book:

1. The forces that cause fertility to drop, such as urbanization, education, and secularization, only increase.
2. A falling population threatens human quality life in a variety of ways, both materially and culturally.
3. Population decline is likely to happen even more quickly than predictions suggest.

Let's figure out whether overpopulation is a real threat, or if the data says something different about the future of humanity!

## Lesson 1: Once countries enter the "fertility trap," they never escape, and the population keeps falling.

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To maintain their numbers, countries need female residents to produce about 2.1 children each. This is enough to replace both a mother and father in the next generation. It also adds a little extra to account for premature deaths and gender ratio imbalance.

When the fertility rate rests above 2.1, population sizes can grow quickly. This observation causes mass unease about food shortages and other problems. However, a fertility rate below 2.1 causes population size to *decrease* rapidly, too.

The interrelated causes of declining fertility rates are urbanization, education, women's liberation, and waning religiosity. These turn children into expensive liabilities instead of assets for a family and society. Young adults start to view having just one child or two as a fulfilling life experience, rather than a duty to their families, country, or God.

Urbanization continues, women's liberation advances, and secularization proceeds speedily. Once there are fewer kids, societies begin to organize themselves differently in ways that discourage future births even more. **Thus, the "low fertility trap": countries that fall below a fertility rate of 1.5 can't rise back above it again.** Unfortunately, many places are already there.

## Lesson 2: World population decline has some severe downsides.

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Why does it matter that world population may peak soon, with some countries' populations having reached their maximum already? **Fewer people doesn't just mean fewer worries and more food to go around.**

Instead, an aging population strains a country's "dependency ratio," or how many working people there are as compared to government-dependent retirees. Unlike children, retired individuals also vote in large numbers and form a powerful interest group. They are less innovative and spend money in different ways.

This demographic leads to fewer schools and daycares but more retirement communities. Young adults thinking of starting families see fewer of their peers doing it. They face higher costs in taking care of even just one or two kids as compared to life in a family-centric society. Overall industrial growth slows.

Some of the ill effects of population decline are less straightforward and economical, but still touch many lives for the worse even now. The world's languages are quickly dying out as the small populations speaking them collapse and urbanize into more dominant ones.

## Lesson 3: Experts have probably underestimated how quickly the world population will decline

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It seems like population growth and decline run on a stage theory called the Demographic Transition Model. At first, birth and death rates are both high. Later, when a population begins to industrialize and grow richer, lifespans lengthen as births continue apace, leading to overall growth in numbers. Eventually, births decline to replacement level and then sink below.

Population forecast models developed by the United Nations and other organizations assume that the future will look like the past. By their estimates, less-developed countries proceed through these demographic stages at the same pace as more-developed countries already have.

Unfortunately, this assumption might not be accurate. **There's reason to believe that today's less-developed countries are experiencing faster and more dramatic declines in fertility than we've seen before.** Official population statistics are not entirely reliable. Interviews with people in countries like Brazil, China, and India reveal that a low fertility mindset has already taken root.

Countries are probably already not doing enough to mitigate the negative effects of declining population. For example, retirement programs are massively underfunded. Some countries like Japan are already deep in the depopulation hole. If world population declines faster than the U.N. predicts, massive political and socio-economic problems could become widespread in a matter of decades instead of centuries.

## Empty Planet Review

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*Empty Planet* provides plenty of contrarian food for thought! This is an insightful read that anyone can learn from, including those hesitant to believe it's claims. Even if you are more optimistic about humanity's prospects for mitigating the harms of declining population than Bricker and Ibitson, it's hard to deny that change is coming.

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## Who would I recommend the Empty Planet summary to?

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The 23-year old recent grad who feels like the world is too crowded for him to make his mark, a retired 68-year old Baby Boomer who wants to understand the unusually fertile period she was born into, and anyone with moral qualms about bringing new life into an "already-full world."