



Activity - Was Malthus right?

In one sense, it is hard to deny that a high population could place a heavy demand on food and other resources, so Malthus' warning about overpopulation should not be dismissed. However, lots of scholars have found flaws in Malthus' work. Have a look at this presentation:

<http://www.yourarticlelibrary.com/population/theories-of-population-malthus-theory-marxs-theory-and-theory-of-demographic-transition/31397>

Do some of these criticisms match your reaction to Activity 1 or did it talk about things that you hadn't considered? Ester Boserup is associated with the famous phrase 'necessity is the mother of invention'. In other words, she thought that an increased population would notice that there was a strain on resources, and more brainpower would lead to technological innovations to grow more food. Think about when Malthus wrote his essay in 1798; since then, technology has moved on considerably and agriculture has become more intensive and efficient. So if you remember Malthus' graph, perhaps the 'food supply' line can keep pace with population growth.

What do you think of Boserup's argument that technology can solve the problem of lack of food? Remember also that technological and societal advances have also affected the 'positive' (e.g. better medicine means people are generally living longer) and 'preventative' (contraception is widely available), and therefore these also affect the rate of population growth.

Another important question to consider, and this links with Activity 4, is why Malthus' theory is so popular today even when scholars have criticised it.

Task 1:

1. See the following article for one such criticism, where the author shows that major environmental problems such as climate change have been caused by countries with low population growth. In the case of carbon emissions, the author argues that it is not population growth which has caused the problem, but Western patterns of consumption:

<http://eau.sagepub.com/content/21/2/545.full.pdf>



2. Read the following article, which suggests that overpopulation is a less significant problem than many other issues when it comes to sustainability:

<http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/blog/concern-overpopulation-red-herring-consumption-problem-sustainability>

3. So despite these criticisms, why is Malthus' theory so popular today? Try and think of some ideas; you can then extend them further when completing the last part of Activity 4.