

# The shock of the old

No one expected it to happen so quickly, and certainly not everywhere – but *Homo sapiens* is ageing fast. This is no bad thing, argues [Fred Pearce](#)

USHI OKUSHIMA is the oldest resident of Ogimi, the most elderly community in Japan - the country where the average age is higher than anywhere else in the world. At 108, she still takes to the floor for traditional Japanese dances. Afterwards she dabs a little French perfume behind her ears and sips the local firewater. Okushima was born when Japan had only recently seen off the shogun warlords. If an ageing population is on the way, she is not a bad advert for what we have in store.

The land of the rising sun has become the land of the setting sun with staggering speed. As recently as 1984, Japan had the youngest population in the developed world, but by 2005 it had become the world's most elderly country. Soon it will become the first country where most people are over 50 years old.

This is partly because Japanese people live longest: men can expect to reach 79 and women 86. It is also partly because the Japanese have almost given up having babies: the fertility rate is just 1.2 children per woman, far lower than the 2.1 needed to maintain a steady population. The rest of the world is following Japan's example. In 19 countries, from Singapore to Iceland, people have a life expectancy of about 80 years. Of all the people in human history who ever reached the age of 65, half are alive now. Meanwhile, women around the world have half as many children as their mothers. And if Japan is the model, their daughters may have half as many as they do.



*Homo sapiens* is ageing fast, and the implications of this may overwhelm all other factors shaping the species over the coming decades - with more wrinklies than pimplys, more walking frames than bike stabilisers, more slippers and pipes than bootees and buggies, and more grey power than student power. The longevity revolution affects every country, every community and almost every household. It promises to restructure the economy, reshape the family, redefine politics and even rearrange the geopolitical order over the coming century.

**“Ageing may overwhelm all other factors shaping our species in the years ahead”**

The revolution has two aspects. First, we are not producing babies like we used to. In just a generation, world fertility has halved to just 2.6 babies per woman. In most of Europe and

much of east Asia, fertility is closer to one child per woman than two, way below long-term replacement levels. The notion that the populations of places such as Brazil and India will go on expanding looks misplaced: in fact, they could soon be contracting. Meanwhile, except in a handful of AIDS-ravaged countries in Africa, people are living longer everywhere.

This is frightening, even for rich nations. In Germany, France and Japan, there are fewer than two taxpaying workers to support each retired pensioner. In Italy, the figure is already fewer than 1.3. Some predict that the world will face a wave of "ageing recessions".

But could there be an upside? I believe so. Flip the coin of ageing and what do we see? In 1965, The Who sang: "Hope I die before I get old." Today, those who survived drugs binges, fast cars, or bad marriages, are older, but often still rocking and making more use of condoms than colostomy bags. Mick Jagger (born 1943) is nobody's idea of a dependant. And Tina Turner took to the stage in London, dancing in heels and a microskirt in her 70th year.

Non-celebrities also remain active, assertive and independent as they age. They fill library and seminar halls once crammed with callow youths. They run picket lines - or marathons. Far from being a weight round society's neck, many of them look like a new human resource waiting to be tapped. Millions of the middle-class retired continue working at everything from lucrative consultancies to teaching literacy or finally finishing that PhD. They are often more valuable than the young workers the demographers imagine are supporting them: in fact, the growing number of society's most qualified, most experienced individuals is potentially a huge demographic dividend.

In future, old people will be expected to stay in the formal economy for longer. The idea of a retirement age was invented by Otto von Bismarck in the 1880s, when as chancellor of Germany he needed a starting age for paying war pensions. He chose the age of 65 because that was typically when ex-soldiers died. But today in developed countries, and soon in poorer ones, women can expect nearly 30 years of retirement, and men 20 years.

### **“In developed countries, women can expect nearly 30 years of retirement”**

There is a deal to be done: longer working in return for more, and more powerful, legislation to outlaw the ageism that blights the working lives of many in late middle age. The old will also expect a society that does not marginalise them; they will consider it a right to live in homes, cities and workplaces redesigned to meet their physical requirements.

Some worry that an older workforce will be less innovative and adaptable, but there is evidence that companies with a decent proportion of older workers are more productive than those addicted to youth. This is sometimes called the Horndal effect, after a Swedish steel mill where productivity rose by 15 per cent as the workforce got older. Age brings experience and wisdom. Think what it could mean when the Edisons and Einsteins of the future, the doctors and technicians, the artists and engineers, have 20 or 30 more years to give us.

Of course, many older people do need healthcare, but many others are fit, competent and self-sustaining. Across Europe, typically only one retired person in 20 lives in a care home. In the UK, of 10 million over-65s, just 300,000 live in care homes (that's about 3 per cent). So the majority of Europe's elderly resemble Okushima in Japan. They are the councillors and counsellors, the social secretaries and neighbourhood wardens, the carers of other elderly people, and even the political and social campaigners and agitators - the glue that holds busy societies together. Far from impoverishing societies, says John MacInnes, a demographer at the University of Edinburgh, UK, all the evidence is that "mass longevity facilitates affluence".

The "silver market" is huge. You have only to watch US network television to see the constant advertising aimed at the elderly, from Viagra and holidays to equipment and leisure wear. Oldies have savings and cash from selling large houses they no longer need. The money is available for purchases and investment - and ultimately for their children.

But this is not fundamentally about economics or retirement. It is about society's zeitgeist, its social wellsprings. The cultural historian Theodore Roszak at California State University, East Bay, once took me to task over an article on the threat of ageing societies: "Ageing," he wrote, "is the best thing that has happened in the modern world, a cultural and ethical shift that looks a lot like sanity."

At 50, we do not expect to act or feel as we did at 20 - nor at 80 as we did at 50. The same is true of societies. What will it be like to live in societies that are much older than any we have known? We are going to find out, because the ageing of the human race is one of the surest predictions of this century. If the 20th century was the teenage century, the 21st will be the age of the old: it will be pioneered by the ageing baby boomers who a generation ago took the cult of youth to new heights. Without the soaring population and so many young overachievers, the tribal elders will return. More boring maybe, but wiser, surely.

The older we are, the less likely we are to be hooked on the latest gizmos and the more we should appreciate things that last. We may even reduce pressure on the world's resources by consuming less, and by conserving our environment more. We must especially hope for that, because unless the boomers can pay reparations for youthful indiscretions with the planet's limits then we may all be doomed.

The 20th century did great things. We should be proud that for the first time most children reach adulthood and most adults grow old. But after our exertions, perhaps we need to slow down a bit. Take a breather. Learn to be older, wiser and greener. Doesn't sound so bad, does it? Here's to Ushi Okushima.

**Profile**

Fred Pearce is a New Scientist consultant. His books include Confessions of an Eco-Sinner and The Last Generation. This essay is based on his latest, Peoplequake, published by Eden Project Books (The Coming Population Crash, Beacon Press, in the US). He turns 59 this year.