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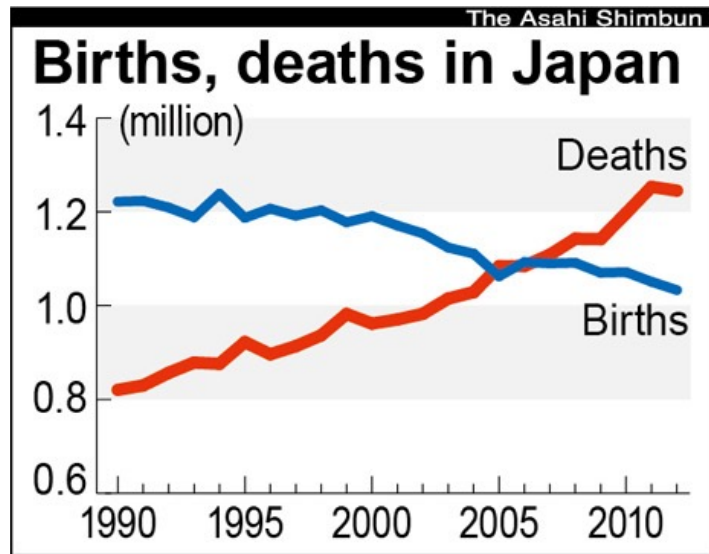
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# TOM TOM ENGLISH



## Population decline? No problem!

## VOCABULARY

### Demographic =

Related to the science  
of population

### Dwindle =

A To fall gradually  
(usually size, amount,  
or strength)

### Shrivel =

To contract or wrinkle  
(especially plants, due  
to lack of water)

### Crumble =

To break or fall into  
small pieces (usually  
due to steady  
deterioration)

## Discussion questions

1. The writer says that there are some positive points to the falling population. What are they? Do you agree that they are positive points? Why? Why not?
2. Can you think of any other positive points of a falling population?
3. What do you think about the “double housing” idea? Is it attractive for you? Do you know anyone who already has two houses?
4. Do you think the government should do something to stop the falling population? What?
5. How will you adapt to life in 2040, with fewer people, fewer children, and more old people? Will it change your lifestyle? How?

## VOCABULARY

### Wither =

To fall into decay or  
decline

### Flourish =

To grow or develop in a  
healthy, vigorous way

### Vacant =

Not occupied; empty

### For a song =

Very cheaply

### Famine =

Extreme shortage of  
food

“Population black hole” is one phrase used to describe the **demographic dwindling** of Japan. From its peak of 128 million in 2008, the nation’s population has shrunk to just over 127 million. Last year alone, it fell 215,000. The old live longer and the birth rate drops. Latest statistics show 33 million people 65 or over - more than twice the number of children under 14.

It’s easy enough to see problems. Last May the Japan Policy Council warned that by 2040 the number of women aged 20-39 living outside the major cities would half. Regional towns would **shrivel**, rural occupations and industries would die, schools and hospitals would close, public transportation would stop, infrastructure would **crumble** - and what then? Japan’s young people would pour into Tokyo, Osaka, and a very few other cities. The worst-case long-term scenario predicted by some is “the extinction of Japan.”

But some people are looking on the bright side. Shukan Shincho says that we can expect less crowded facilities and more relaxed lifestyle. We just have to adjust. Takahiko Furuta, president of the Research Institute for Contemporary Society, say that our current “growth society” will evolve into a “mature society” - less growth, and deeper enjoyment of simple things.

And growth may not **wither**. Furuta says that population shrinkage has already caused a drop in demand for toilet paper. However, producers compete to make the softest brand, or the most attractive design. Consumers are happy to pay higher prices for higher quality, and

competition **flourishes**. Can this be true in all sectors?

Then there is housing. One-seventh of the houses in Japan are **vacant**. It sounds disastrous, but is it? Sweden had a similar problem 30 years ago, and solved it with a concept known as “double housing.” Owning two homes - one in the city, another in the country - became standard as city-dwellers bought up vacant rural properties **for a song**. In Sweden now, the old urban-rural distinction doesn’t apply. Most people are urban on weekdays and rural on weekends and holidays. Part salaryman, part farmer. Might that happen in Japan too?

Population declines have happened before, without causing “extinction”. In 1718, Japan’s population was 30 million. Seventy years later, due to a series of **famines**, it had fallen by 3 million. Famines are terrible, but this period coincided with a remarkable cultural flowering in which kabuki, ukiyoe and introductory studies of Western science (“Dutch studies”) **flourished**. Who knows what the current depopulation will produce?

Prime Minister Abe and the Keidanren have spoken of the need to keep the population above 100 million. Furuta wonders if they know where that 100 million idea originally comes from. He explains that it was not an economic idea - it was it was considered Japan’s ideal population to conquer Asia before World War 2.