



This is not your Savior

[John Voelcker says no](#), and he is right (h/t TPM). In fact, he is so clearly right that I am not sure why one would write this piece. Indeed, I'm a little suspicious of the hidden agenda here.

Voelcker points out five things that make driving a Prius Not The Savior Of Planet Earth. They are, essentially:

1. It's better to drive an electric car, which is a Zero Emission Vehicle. To be sure, as Voelcker acknowledges, this will turn on the nature of the power grid: if the ZEV is powered by coal-fired electricity, then it may be worse than a Prius. But as he argues — persuasively in my view — grids are getting cleaner because they are going off coal, and onto natural gas and renewables.
2. It's better to drive less than to drive the same amount with a Prius. Very true: even a ZEV has emissions because the electricity comes from the grid: if you walk or ride a bike, then you are making no emissions.
3. Even if you drive a Prius, hundreds of millions of Indian and Chinese drivers will be driving Nanos or whatever, and even if they drive ZEVs — which they won't — your driving a Prius doesn't make up for that.
4. Driving a Prius doesn't account for other non-sustainable aspects of our lifestyles, like taking airplane flights and having pets with large litters.
5. If we really want to reduce emissions, then we need to make large investments in family planning and contraception. Fewer people means fewer emissions.

This is all true as far as it goes, but it 1) misses the point, and 2) carries some dangerous ideological implications about which environmentalists should be very wary.

It misses the point because only the most blinkered and detached person would argue that he or she has saved the planet by driving a Prius. They would probably argue that they have done something good for the planet, and maybe that they have done their part. To be sure, as Voelcker says, we can always do better, and we shouldn't be satisfied with a) driving a Prius; and then b) jetting all over the world. Indeed, there is a (somewhat unavoidable) irony of delegates to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change flying all over the world to attend the conference. But this is a relatively obvious point: I'm not sure who Voelcker's audience is. (Maybe the sort of people for whom it *isn't* an obvious point: but are they reading *greencarreports.com*? Perhaps).

It carries dangerous ideological implications because of its connection of birth control to environmentalism. As a straightforward matter, this is true: fewer people *does* mean less emissions. But environmentalists need to speak *very* carefully about this. [Article 16 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states](#), "Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family." Any mention by environmentalists of family planning or birth control *must* be accompanied by a strong statement that any actions must be voluntary. Voelcker doesn't say so explicitly: he suggests that access to family planning and contraception services must be "made available" and that perhaps a contribution to Planned Parenthood might be better than driving the Prius. And both of these may be right. But every statement connecting the environment to family planning must come with *very* clear caveats. (And it doesn't help that just one paragraph earlier, Voelcker talks about spaying your pet.).

I'm not familiar with Voelcker's earlier work, but here he seems to set up a straw man in order to make point that are true but somewhat carelessly written. I don't know what the agenda is here, but let's not play [Jonathan Swift](#) either, okay?