

Australians among longest living in world

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Australia may be the "lucky country" but its indigenous people are not so **fortunate** when it comes to longevity.

Figures recently released by the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that Australians are among the longest-living people in the **world**, with an average lifespan of 78.5 years for males and 83.3 years for females born "Down Under".

But the figures **drop** by around 17 years for indigenous Australians, whose average life expectancy in 2001 was 59.4 years for males and 64.8 for females.

Several factors, including poverty, discrimination, substance abuse and poor access to health, are **believed** to affect the lifespan of these original Australians.

For the rest of the nation, the capital Canberra -- often derided as boring and soulless -- is statistically the best place to sustain a long life.

The lakeside city's 325,000 people enjoy the longest **average** lifespan, with women living to 84 years and most men to 79.9.

Built to resolve a bitter 1908 dispute between Sydney and Melbourne over which should be capital, modern Canberra has the wealthiest and best-educated population **in** Australia.

The city's unemployment rate hovers at barely 2.8 percent, while weekly **wages** are well above the Australian average at A\$1,208, backed by a booming information technology industry and government salaries.

At the other end of the **scale** is the sparsely populated outback Northern Territory, cinematic home to "Crocodile Dundee".

The territory accounts for only 1 percent of Australia's 20 million population.

Men there live to 72.5 years on average, while women live to 78.2. More than a quarter of the population are aboriginal Australians, who often live on remote communities with poor **access** to jobs, health and education services and have one of the lowest life expectancies.

Australia's nationwide average life expectancy for males is exceeded only by Iceland and Hong Kong **while** the female life expectancy is exceeded by Japan and Hong Kong.

Armed and dangerous: the winter snow guns

It's deep winter, the season when smart Europeans strap their skis to the 4x4 and head for the Alps or Pyrenees to enjoy an exhilarating swoosh down the slopes - accompanied **by** the rumble and waste of the artificial snow machine.

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The snow gun, **which** sprays these still-green slopes with the fluffy white stuff nature is increasingly reluctant to provide, has become as much a fixture of the winter sports scene as the chair lift, but much more environmentally damaging.

An **estimated** 98 per cent of Europe's ski resorts now have snow makers, and some places are totally dependent on fake flakes. Without these groaning monsters that belch fake snow from one end while consuming huge amounts of power at the other, no ski resort in the Catalan Pyrenees would have opened this season.

The use of snow cannons has **doubled** in the past 10 years. More than 2,000 machines were working the Catalan pistes at the start of this season - 547 of them in the resort of Baqueira Beret- whitening 280km of runs.

But the energy used to keep the machines spewing snow has tripled. Catalonia's nine main ski regions have contracted some 9,000kW of electricity to keep their business alive - enough to power a town of 15,000 people. Some resorts face **bills** of €300,000 (Â£200,000) to keep snow on the ground. That's after paying €10,000 for each cannon.

This squandering of power **has been forced** upon Catalonia by the lack of snow, which threatens one of Spain's most important economic sectors: the high-end tourism market. This year is worse than before - with visitor numbers down 50 per cent - not only because of the mild winter, but what cold air there is **lacks** precipitation and hence snow. This means thirsty snow machines must draw on water from depleted lakes and reservoirs.

The campaigners Ecologists in Action say it's a **vicious** circle: lack of snow increases the use of machines, which boosts the emission of CO₂, increases global warming and makes the snow **even** scarcer.

Jose Enrique Vazquez, an environmental expert, says resorts **could** curb energy waste if they installed renewable systems. So next time you sweep down the snowy Pyrenees, watch out for wind turbines among the cable cars.

German Population Continues to Decline

Germany's population fell for a fourth consecutive year in 2006 and recorded the biggest drop **since** the country's reunification in 1990, the government said Friday, days after launching financial **incentives** designed to stall falling birth rates.

The number of births, meanwhile, was the lowest since World War II.

At the end of 2006, the number of people living in Germany was an estimated 82.3 million, 130,000 **below** the total at the end of 2005, the Federal Statistics Office said.

Germany's population grew in 2001 and 2002, but has fallen each year since. From 2003-2005 the population dropped **by** 5,000, 31,000 and 63,000, respectively.

German officials have been reluctant to ease immigration rules to bolster the work force, **despite** complaints from industry that there are not enough skilled workers in some areas. Demographers and economists say the problem will only grow worse, and that an aging population will put serious strains on pension funding and on the economy for lack of workers.

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A recent government study forecast that the population could fall as low as 69 million **by** 2050.

During 2006, the agency said there were about 675,000 births, down from 686,000 recorded in 2005. The latest figure represents the fewest since World War II and far below the 922,000 births recorded in 1946, when the country lay in ruins after its defeat.

The population decline was also **due to** a drop in net immigration, from 79,000 in 2005 to between 20,000 and 30,000 last year, officials said.

"Immigration was nowhere near enough to make up for the births deficit," the statistics office said.

Starting Jan. 1, the parents of newborn children are entitled to share up to 14 months of **leave** from their jobs and receive about two-thirds of their net salaries in a bid to **encourage** couples to have more children.

The move, designed particularly to help working moms have more children, follows **similar** moves in other European countries concerned about their aging populations.

Why China wants you to learn Chinese

What do New York, Hawaii, Kansas, California, Mexico, France, Serbia, South Korea, Egypt, Australia, Russia, and Rwanda have in **common**?

Almost nothing, except that they now play host to the language-and-culture centers being mass-produced by the Chinese government with trademark Chinese speed and **efficiency**: 130 Confucius Institutes (CI) have been established in 50 countries **over** the past few years. The United States already has a dozen, with several more in the works. Their purpose, say Beijing officials, is to promote the Chinese language and enhance China's relationships around the world.

Against the backdrop of China's rise as an economic power, many Americans are eager to learn the language. Yet some are concerned **about** China's motives.

"The purpose is to teach language," says an official at the Chinese consulate in San Francisco. "We want to meet the **growing** demand for Chinese language instruction." Hanban, the department in China's Ministry of Education that oversees foreign language programs, says on its website that it also hopes to promote friendly relationships.

In fact, the CI is only one initiative in a large-scale charm offensive that China has **launched** in recent years. Education, culture, foreign aid, the Olympics - all these "soft power" tools aim to attract people to China's rising status rather than intimidate them, say analysts.

"They have very high expectations," says Michael Levine, director of the Asia Society, a nonprofit organization in New York that seeks to **strengthen** US-China ties. "They are very driven about their goals," with language probably ranking in the top ten, Mr. Levine says.

The institutes are joint ventures, almost always housed within a university. A partner school in China sends teachers; the local school provides office space and staff; China also gives institutes in the US grants ranging from tens to hundreds of thousands of dollars, which the local universities usually match. **Finally**, Hanban dispatches a representative to give the official stamp of approval.

But after the initial fanfare, many CIs are left quite bare: an office and a few staff members with little idea of how to proceed. The country's first program at the University of Maryland **has had** only a few dozen students

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since opening two years ago. The two teachers promised from China just arrived last month. It took a year to figure out how to proceed, says administrator Rebecca McGinnis. It's a matter of "getting that big wheel started."

Certainly, the demand for Chinese language instruction is rising. China, the world's fourth-largest economy, continues to grow 9.5 percent a year on average and is a top recipient of direct foreign investment. No wonder, **as** its Ministry of Education predicts, 100 million people around the world will be taking Chinese lessons by 2010.

Divorce better than arguing, say children

For years children have been considered the real victims of divorce, doomed to a life of insecurity, underachievement and endless shuttling between two homes.

But two studies have found that most children whose parents split up are happy with their new life and do not see divorce as a tragedy.

A **poll** of 2,000 adults and 350 children published today found that 80 per cent of 10 to 15-year-olds were "quite happy" or "very happy" with their family life. The same proportion said that things were "just as good" or "better" since the separation.

Less than a third of the children (28 per cent) longed for their parents to get back together. An "end to the arguments" was cited as the greatest benefit of divorce by far.

Today is traditionally the **busiest** day of the year for divorce lawyers, when they are deluged with inquiries about separation. A stressful Christmas is often the last straw for an unhappy couple, experts say.

The poll was commissioned by insidedivorce.com and conducted last month by Tickbox. Its findings are **supported** by detailed academic research nearing completion, which has tracked the experiences of 60 children of divorced or separated parents over nine years.

Jennifer Flowerdew and Bren Neale, sociologists at the University of Leeds, are the principal researchers working on *Family Dynamics after Divorce*. Dr Flowerdew told *The Times*: "When the separation **is taking place** it is often very difficult and hugely challenging for everyone involved. But that is temporary. Over time the divorce fades into the background and things **settle down** into their new pattern.

"When the children were interviewed four years on they were very keen to emphasise that the divorce was just one of several challenges they had to face. Only a small minority got stuck, **while** the rest became preoccupied with the other problems of their own lives. They mostly saw themselves as leading perfectly **ordinary** family lives and did not want to be typecast as the children of divorced parents."

She said that one of the biggest advances had been an end to the stigma once attached to divorce. Dr Flowerdew believes that the idea that children always fare better when their parents are married — most **recently** endorsed by David Cameron, the Tory leader — has not been tested.

"Just like there are many different kinds of divorces, there are many different kinds of marriages," she said. "Some are OK and some are not and no one examines what life is like for children when the marriage is not OK."

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The poll and the research found that children came off worst when parents continued to argue over access and ignored their wishes. One fifth of the children surveyed, mostly boys, complained that they did not have enough say over where they spent their time.

Bad weather in search for Indonesian jet

Indonesian air force planes took to the skies and navy ships scoured the sea Thursday, searching for a missing jetliner and its passengers, including an Oregon man and his two daughters. After a fruitless day of searching Wednesday, rescuers resumed their duties Thursday. Earlier this week, officials wrongly reported finding the Boeing 737's wreckage and a dozen survivors, causing anguish among the passengers' families.

Gen. Eddy Suyanto, the Indonesian air force officer in charge of the search, said Thursday that the weather was clear but that wind, rain and cloud forecast for later in the day would likely bring a halt to the air mission.

“Search efforts have expanded, they're more sophisticated ... but they haven't discovered anything as far as they've told me,” the girls'mother, Felice Jackson DuBois of Bend, Ore., told the Associated Press by telephone Wednesday. “It's still a zero at this point.”

The Adam Air plane with 102 on board was flying from Indonesia's main island of Java to North Sulawesi Island's provincial capital of Manado when it disappeared Monday. Flying in stormy weather, the aircraft vanished after sending out distress signals -the first over forested mountains and the second along the coast. Among the passengers was Scott Jackson, a 54-year-old representative of the wood products industry, and his daughters, 21-year-old Stephanie and 18-year-old Lindsey. Both daughters are students at the University of Oregon.

“Anytime I hear that they're going on an airplane, yes, I'm scared,” their mother told the Oregonian newspaper. But you can't live your life guided by your fears.

Rescuers spent the first day climbing steep trails in western Sulawesi Island - and only later acknowledged that they had been chasing rumours from villagers about burning wreckage and survivors.

“It's hard to ferret out the rumours from the facts,” DuBois said. “All we can do is wait.”

Authorities expanded their search to the Makasar Strait on Wednesday, as three navy ships set sail just after sunrise, and five air force planes searched a 300-square-mile area. Clear skies early in the day were replaced by rain and strong winds and more storms were forecast for Thursday. For relatives of the passengers - some camped out at the Adam Air counter at the Manado airport - the wait for information was agonizing. More than 150 gathered at a crisis centre at the airport demanding information.

“It's been three days, we just want to know what happened,” said Selvi Kawengian, 43, whose younger brother was on the plane with his wife and 18-month-old son.

Adam Air, which began operations in 2003, was founded by Agung Laksono, the speaker of Indonesia's house of representatives and the company's chairman.

Court may force Bush's hand on environment

The supreme court in Washington will bring its ultimate authority to bear for the first time today on the issue of global warming - hearing legal arguments in a case that environmentalists believe could have far-reaching consequences.

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Twelve US states, led by California and Massachusetts and backed by several cities and environmental groups, have brought the case **to try to** force the Bush administration to regulate carbon dioxide emissions from cars and factories.

They **are challenging** an appeal court ruling that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) - an arm of the administration - was not obliged to regulate CO2

Carbon dioxide is recognised as the prime cause of the greenhouse effect that leads to global warming. Campaigners say that when the supreme court passes **judgment** in a few months' time, it will determine the pace and tone of America's approach to climate change.

If the states lose the action, tough new measures brought in by California to force car manufacturers to produce cleaner vehicles would instantly be imperilled, as the state's legal right to set its own emissions targets would be undermined.

Other states, mostly in the north-east, **have followed** California's example and introduced their own tougher restrictions on emissions. These would also be in doubt.

If the states win the action, say campaigners, the EPA would be forced to take a more active approach to controlling emissions. "It would send a powerful signal - not least to the markets - that the US is getting serious, and make real change more inevitable," said Josh Dorner, a spokesman for the Sierra Club, a leading US environmental organisation.

Under the Clinton presidency, the EPA took the line that it **did have** the authority to regulate CO2. But the Bush administration reversed that policy and, in 2003, the EPA announced that the gas was not a pollutant under the clean air act, and consequently it had no right to regulate it.

Since then, the White House has taken a consistent approach that **voluntary** measures are preferable to federally imposed solutions. It argues that the scientific causes of global warming remain insufficiently understood for tighter regulations to be merited.

The environmental group, Friends of the Earth (FoE), one of the **participants** in today's action, said the law appeared clear-cut. Under the clean air act, the EPA was obliged to regulate any pollutant "which may reasonably be anticipated to endanger public health or welfare" - including anything **impacting** on climate and weather. "This should be a fairly easy decision for the supreme court to make," said Sara Zdeb, FoE's legislative director.

However, the court is an unknown quantity on global warming. It has never dealt with the subject before, while two of its nine justices - the chief justice John Roberts and Samuel Alito - are relatively new to the court.

Besides California and Massachusetts, the states involved in the action are Connecticut, Illinois, Maine, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont and Washington. The cities **backing** it include New York, Baltimore and Washington DC.

\$100 laptop project launches 2007

The first **batch** of computers built for the One Laptop Per Child project could reach users by July this year.

The scheme is hoping to put low-cost computers into the hands of people in developing countries. Ultimately the project's backers hope the machines could sell for as little as \$100 (Â£55). The first countries to **sign up** to

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buying the machine include Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay, Nigeria, Libya, Pakistan and Thailand. The so-called XO machine is being pioneered by Nicholas Negroponte, who launched the project at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Media Lab in 2004. Test machines are expected to reach children in February as the project builds towards a more formal **launch**.

Mr Negroponte told the Associated Press news agency that three more African countries might sign on in the next two weeks. The laptop is powered by a 366-megahertz processor from Advanced Micro Devices and has built-in wireless networking. It **has no** hard disk drive and instead uses 512 MB of flash memory, and has two USB ports to which more storage could be attached.

"I have to laugh when people **refer to** XO as a weak or crippled machine and how kids should get a "real one", " Mr Negroponte told AP. "Trust me, I **will** give up my real one very soon and use only XO. It will be far better, in many new and important ways."

The computer runs on a cut-down version of the open source Linux operating system and has been designed to work differently to a Microsoft Windows or Apple machine from a usability perspective. Instead of information being stored along the organising principle of folders and a desktop, users of the XO machine are encouraged to work on an electronic journal, a log of everything the user **has done** on the laptop. The machine comes with a web browser, word processor and RSS reader, for accessing the web feeds that so many sites now offer.

"In fact, one of the saddest but most common conditions in elementary school computer labs (when they exist in the developing world), is the children **are being trained** to use Word, Excel and PowerPoint," Mr Negroponte said. "I consider that criminal, because children should be making things, communicating, exploring, sharing, not running office automation tools."

The new user interface, known as Sugar, has been praised by some of the observers of the One Laptop Per Child project. It doesn't feel like Linux. It doesn't feel like Windows. It doesn't feel like Apple," said Wayan Vota, who launched the OLPCNews.com blog and is also **director** of Geekcorps, an organisation that facilitates technology volunteers in developing countries.

"I'm just impressed they built a new (user interface) that is different and hopefully better than anything we have today," he said. But he added: "Granted, I'm not a child. I don't know if it's going to be intuitive to children."

Trial versions of the operating system in development **can be** downloaded to be tested out by technically-minded computer users around the world.