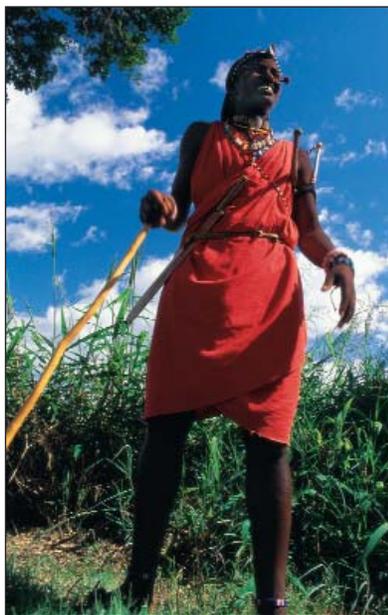


The Shape We're In

Once in a while, in our headlong rush toward greater prosperity, it is wise to ask ourselves whether or not we can get there from here. As global population increases, and the demands we make on our natural resources grow even faster, it becomes ever more clear that the well-being we seek is imperiled by what we do. Therefore, in an effort to encourage constructive thought about our collective future, we commissioned a group of short Viewpoints about some of the common resources—air, fresh water, fisheries, food and soil, energy—and key trends—in human population, biodiversity, and climate—that are most important for our general well-being. These articles, assembled as a 4-week-long series beginning in this issue called the “State of the Planet,” are brief overviews of the current states of affairs of those areas, and how things might change in the near future. They are meant not as answers but as stepping-off points. However, what is done with information is as important as the information itself.



Therefore, on 12 December, immediately following this series, we will present a special issue on the “Tragedy of the Commons,” the classic metaphor of the late Garret Hardin which appeared 35 years ago, in which some contemporary ideas about the management of shared resources will be discussed.

Nothing affects our impact on the planet more than our number. Therefore, we begin the State of the Planet series with “Human Population: The Next Half Century,” by Joel E. Cohen, which examines the recent history of human population and predicts how it might change over the next 50 years. Next, Martin Jenkins discusses trends in biodiversity, the causes of these trends, and what they mean for human survival, in “Prospects for Biodiversity.”

In the following weeks, we will focus more on specific resources. On 21 November, Michael Stocking examines the quality and health of tropical soils and food supplies in “Tropical Soils and Food Security.” Accompanying that, Daniel Pauly *et al.* consider our marine food reserves in “The Future for Fisheries.” On 28 November, the series continues with an examination of water availability, “Global Freshwater Resources: Soft-Path Solutions for the 21st Century” by Peter Gleick. Then, Raymond J. Chow *et al.* discuss the resource most vital to the economic and technological growth that are so universally sought, in “Energy Resources and Global Development.” In the final issue of the series, on 5 December, Hajime Akimoto presents an overview of “Global Air Quality and Pollution,” something that until fairly recently was considered a local or regional issue. We conclude with “Modern Global Climate Change” by Thomas R. Karl and Kevin E. Trenberth, in which they discuss what is undoubtedly one of the most pressing issues of our time. Links to all of the articles in the series, as well as to Web resources accompanying each article, can be found at www.sciencemag.org/sciext/sotp.

This collection of articles is offered in the spirit of “forewarned is forearmed,” not “the sky is falling.” Whether we find ourselves forearmed or under the fallen sky depends largely on what we choose to do about these issues over the next generation.

—H. JESSE SMITH

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