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Peter M. Vitousek, *et al.*

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Human Domination of Earth's Ecosystems

Peter M. Vitousek, Harold A. Mooney, Jane Lubchenco, Jerry M. Melillo

Human alteration of Earth is substantial and growing. Between one-third and one-half of the land surface has been transformed by human action; the carbon dioxide concentration in the atmosphere has increased by nearly 30 percent since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution; more atmospheric nitrogen is fixed by humanity than by all natural terrestrial sources combined; more than half of all accessible surface fresh water is put to use by humanity; and about one-quarter of the bird species on Earth have been driven to extinction. By these and other standards, it is clear that we live on a human-dominated planet.

All organisms modify their environment, and humans are no exception. As the human population has grown and the power of technology has expanded, the scope and nature of this modification has changed drastically. Until recently, the term "human-dominated ecosystems" would have elicited images of agricultural fields, pastures, or urban landscapes; now it applies with greater or lesser force to all of Earth. Many ecosystems are dominated directly by humanity, and no ecosystem on Earth's surface is free of pervasive human influence.

This article provides an overview of human effects on Earth's ecosystems. It is not intended as a litany of environmental disasters, though some disastrous situations are described; nor is it intended either to downplay or to celebrate environmental successes, of which there have been many. Rather, we explore how large humanity looms as a presence on the globe—how, even on the grandest scale, most aspects of the structure and functioning of Earth's ecosystems cannot be understood without accounting for the strong, often dominant influence of humanity.

We view human alterations to the Earth system as operating through the interacting processes summarized in Fig. 1. The growth of the human population, and growth in the resource base used by humanity, is maintained by a suite of human enterprises such as agriculture, industry, fishing, and international commerce. These enterprises transform the land surface (through cropping, forestry, and urbanization), alter the major biogeochemical cycles, and add or remove species and genetically distinct populations in most of Earth's ecosystems. Many of these changes are substantial and

reasonably well quantified; all are ongoing. These relatively well-documented changes in turn entrain further alterations to the functioning of the Earth system, most notably by driving global climatic change (1) and causing irreversible losses of biological diversity (2).

Land Transformation

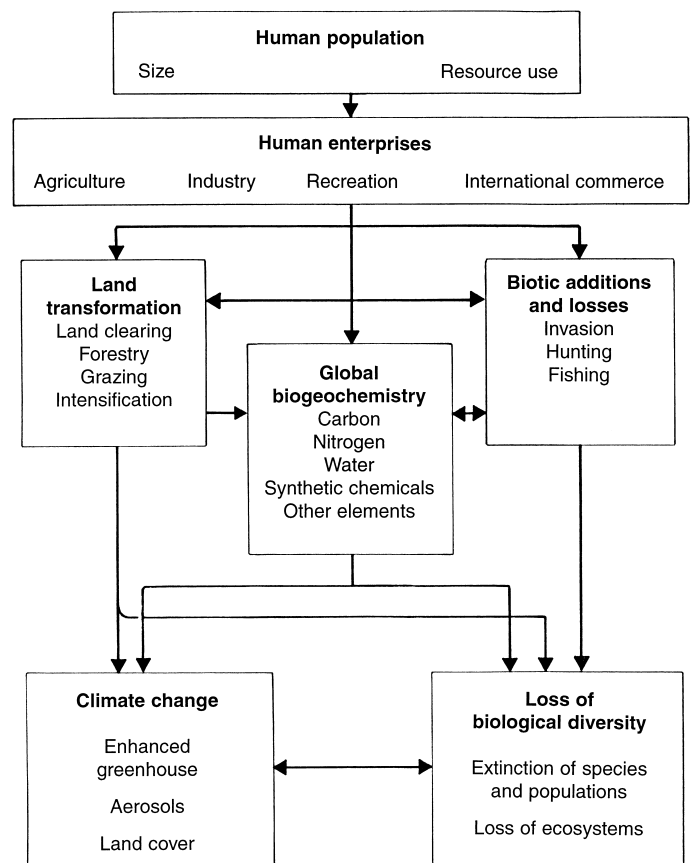
The use of land to yield goods and services represents the most substantial human alteration of the Earth system. Human use of land alters the structure and functioning of ecosystems, and it alters how ecosystems

interact with the atmosphere, with aquatic systems, and with surrounding land. Moreover, land transformation interacts strongly with most other components of global environmental change.

The measurement of land transformation on a global scale is challenging; changes can be measured more or less straightforwardly at a given site, but it is difficult to aggregate these changes regionally and globally. In contrast to analyses of human alteration of the global carbon cycle, we cannot install instruments on a tropical mountain to collect evidence of land transformation. Remote sensing is a most useful technique, but only recently has there been a serious scientific effort to use high-resolution civilian satellite imagery to evaluate even the more visible forms of land transformation, such as deforestation, on continental to global scales (3).

Land transformation encompasses a wide variety of activities that vary substantially in their intensity and consequences. At one extreme, 10 to 15% of Earth's land surface is occupied by row-

Fig. 1. A conceptual model illustrating humanity's direct and indirect effects on the Earth system [modified from (56)].



P. M. Vitousek and H. A. Mooney are in the Department of Biological Sciences, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305, USA. J. Lubchenco is in the Department of Zoology, Oregon State University, Corvallis, OR 97331, USA. J. M. Melillo is at the U.S. Office of Science and Technology Policy, Old Executive Office Building, Room 443, Washington, DC 20502, USA.

crop agriculture or by urban-industrial areas, and another 6 to 8% has been converted to pastureland (4); these systems are wholly changed by human activity. At the other extreme, every terrestrial ecosystem is affected by increased atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂), and most ecosystems have a history of hunting and other low-intensity resource extraction. Between these extremes lie grassland and semiarid ecosystems that are grazed (and sometimes degraded) by domestic animals, and forests and woodlands from which wood products have been harvested; together, these represent the majority of Earth's vegetated surface.

The variety of human effects on land makes any attempt to summarize land transformations globally a matter of semantics as well as substantial uncertainty. Estimates of the fraction of land transformed or degraded by humanity (or its corollary, the fraction of the land's biological production that is used or dominated) fall in the range of 39 to 50% (5) (Fig. 2). These numbers have large uncertainties, but the fact that they are large is not at all uncertain. Moreover, if anything these estimates understate the global impact of land transformation, in that land that has not been transformed often has been divided into fragments by human alteration of the surrounding areas. This fragmentation affects the species composition and functioning of otherwise little modified ecosystems (6).

Overall, land transformation represents the primary driving force in the loss of biological diversity worldwide. Moreover, the effects of land transformation extend far beyond the boundaries of transformed lands. Land transformation can affect climate directly at local and even regional scales. It contributes ~20% to current anthropogenic CO₂ emissions, and more substantially to the increasing concentrations of the greenhouse gases methane and nitrous oxide; fires associated with it alter

the reactive chemistry of the troposphere, bringing elevated carbon monoxide concentrations and episodes of urban-like photochemical air pollution to remote tropical areas of Africa and South America; and it causes runoff of sediment and nutrients that drive substantial changes in stream, lake, estuarine, and coral reef ecosystems (7–10).

The central importance of land transformation is well recognized within the community of researchers concerned with global environmental change. Several research programs are focused on aspects of it (9, 11); recent and substantial progress toward understanding these aspects has been made (3), and much more progress can be anticipated. Understanding land transformation is a difficult challenge; it requires integrating the social, economic, and cultural causes of land transformation with evaluations of its biophysical nature and consequences. This interdisciplinary approach is essential to predicting the course, and to any hope of affecting the consequences, of human-caused land transformation.

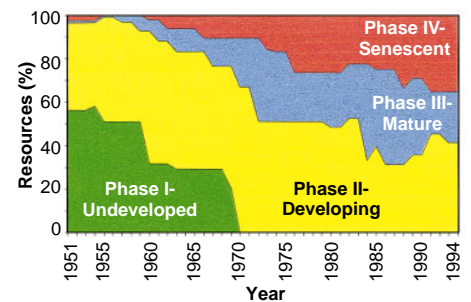
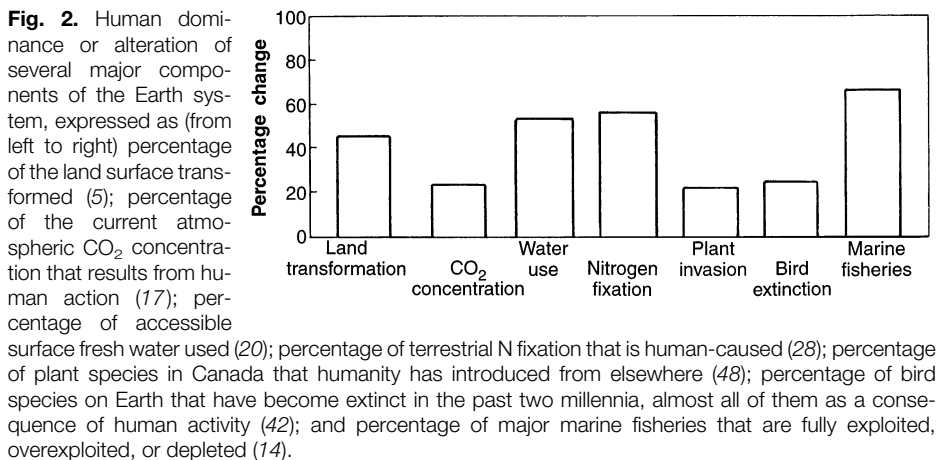
Oceans

Human alterations of marine ecosystems are more difficult to quantify than those of terrestrial ecosystems, but several kinds of information suggest that they are substantial. The human population is concentrated near coasts—about 60% within 100 km—and the oceans' productive coastal margins have been affected strongly by humanity. Coastal wetlands that mediate interactions between land and sea have been altered over large areas; for example, approximately 50% of mangrove ecosystems globally have been transformed or destroyed by human activity (12). Moreover, a recent analysis suggested that although humans use about 8% of the primary production of the oceans, that frac-

tion grows to more than 25% for upwelling areas and to 35% for temperate continental shelf systems (13).

Many of the fisheries that capture marine productivity are focused on top predators, whose removal can alter marine ecosystems out of proportion to their abundance. Moreover, many such fisheries have proved to be unsustainable, at least at our present level of knowledge and control. As of 1995, 22% of recognized marine fisheries were overexploited or already depleted, and 44% more were at their limit of exploitation (14) (Figs. 2 and 3). The consequences of fisheries are not restricted to their target organisms; commercial marine fisheries around the world discard 27 million tons of nontarget animals annually, a quantity nearly one-third as large as total landings (15). Moreover, the dredges and trawls used in some fisheries damage habitats substantially as they are dragged along the sea floor.

A recent increase in the frequency, extent, and duration of harmful algal blooms in coastal areas (16) suggests that human activity has affected the base as well as the top of marine food chains. Harmful algal blooms are sudden increases in the abundance of marine phytoplankton that produce harmful structures or chemicals. Some but not all of these phytoplankton are strongly pigmented (red or brown tides). Algal blooms usually are correlated with changes in temperature, nutrients, or salinity; nutrients in coastal waters, in particular, are much modified by human activity. Algal blooms can cause extensive fish kills through toxins and by causing anoxia; they also lead to paralytic shellfish poisoning and amnesic shellfish poisoning in humans. Although the existence of harmful algal blooms has long been recognized, they have spread widely in the past two decades (16).



Alterations of the Biogeochemical Cycles

Carbon. Life on Earth is based on carbon, and the CO₂ in the atmosphere is the primary resource for photosynthesis. Humanity adds CO₂ to the atmosphere by mining and burning fossil fuels, the residue of life from the distant past, and by converting forests and grasslands to agricultural and other low-biomass ecosystems. The net result of both activities is that organic carbon from rocks, organisms, and soils is released into the atmosphere as CO₂.

The modern increase in CO₂ represents the clearest and best documented signal of human alteration of the Earth system. Thanks to the foresight of Roger Revelle, Charles Keeling, and others who initiated careful and systematic measurements of atmospheric CO₂ in 1957 and sustained them through budget crises and changes in scientific fashions, we have observed the concentration of CO₂ as it has increased steadily from 315 ppm to 362 ppm. Analysis of air bubbles extracted from the Antarctic and Greenland ice caps extends the record back much further; the CO₂ concentration was more or less stable near 280 ppm for thousands of years until about 1800, and has increased exponentially since then (17).

There is no doubt that this increase has been driven by human activity, today primarily by fossil fuel combustion. The sources of CO₂ can be traced isotopically; before the period of extensive nuclear testing in the atmosphere, carbon depleted in ¹⁴C was a specific tracer of CO₂ derived from fossil fuel combustion, whereas carbon depleted in ¹³C characterized CO₂ from both fossil fuels and land transformation. Direct measurements in the atmosphere, and analyses of carbon isotopes in tree rings, show that both ¹³C and ¹⁴C in CO₂ were diluted in the atmosphere relative to ¹²C as the CO₂ concentration in the atmosphere increased.

Fossil fuel combustion now adds 5.5 ± 0.5 billion metric tons of CO₂-C to the atmosphere annually, mostly in economically developed regions of the temperate zone (18) (Fig. 4). The annual accumulation of CO₂-C has averaged 3.2 ± 0.2 billion metric tons recently (17). The other major terms in the atmospheric carbon balance are net ocean-atmosphere flux, net release of carbon during land transformation, and net storage in terrestrial biomass and soil organic matter. All of these terms are smaller and less certain than fossil fuel combustion or annual atmospheric accumulation; they represent rich areas of current research, analysis, and

sometimes contention.

The human-caused increase in atmospheric CO₂ already represents nearly a 30% change relative to the pre-industrial era (Fig. 2), and CO₂ will continue to increase for the foreseeable future. Increased CO₂ represents the most important human enhancement to the greenhouse effect; the consensus of the climate research community is that it probably already affects climate detectably and will drive substantial climate change in the next century (1). The direct effects of increased CO₂ on plants and ecosystems may be even more important. The growth of most plants is enhanced by elevated CO₂, but to very different extents; the tissue chemistry of plants that respond to CO₂ is altered in ways that decrease food quality for animals and microbes; and the water use efficiency of plants and ecosystems generally is increased. The fact that increased CO₂ affects species differentially means that it is likely to drive substantial changes in the species composition and dynamics of all terrestrial ecosystems (19).

Water. Water is essential to all life. Its movement by gravity, and through evaporation and condensation, contributes to driving Earth's biogeochemical cycles and to controlling its climate. Very little of the

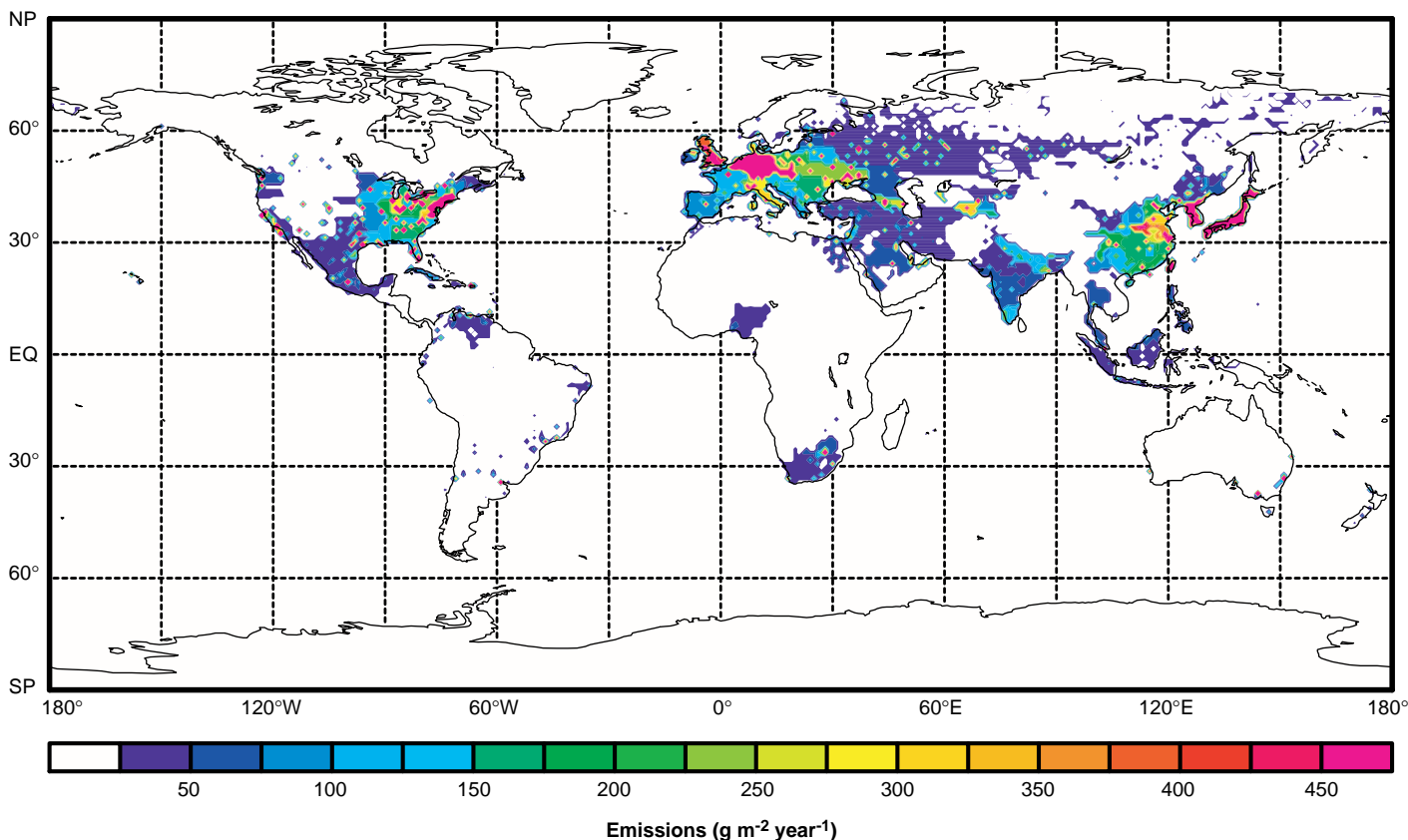


Fig. 4. Geographical distribution of fossil fuel sources of CO₂ as of 1990. The global mean is $12.2 \text{ g m}^{-2} \text{ year}^{-1}$; most emissions occur in economically developed regions of the north temperate zone. EQ, equator; NP, North Pole; SP, South Pole. [Prepared by A. S. Denning, from information in (18)]

water on Earth is directly usable by humans; most is either saline or frozen. Globally, humanity now uses more than half of the runoff water that is fresh and reasonably accessible, with about 70% of this use in agriculture (20) (Fig. 2). To meet increasing demands for the limited supply of fresh water, humanity has extensively altered river systems through diversions and impoundments. In the United States only 2% of the rivers run unimpeded, and by the end of this century the flow of about two-thirds of all of Earth's rivers will be regulated (21). At present, as much as 6% of Earth's river runoff is evaporated as a consequence of human manipulations (22). Major rivers, including the Colorado, the Nile, and the Ganges, are used so extensively that little water reaches the sea. Massive inland water bodies, including the Aral Sea and Lake Chad, have been greatly reduced in extent by water diversions for agriculture. Reduction in the volume of the Aral Sea resulted in the demise of native fishes and the loss of other biota; the loss of a major fishery; exposure of the salt-laden sea bottom, thereby providing a major source of windblown dust; the production of a drier and more continental local climate and a decrease in water quality in the general region; and an increase in human diseases (23).

Impounding and impeding the flow of rivers provides reservoirs of water that can be used for energy generation as well as for agriculture. Waterways also are managed for transport, for flood control, and for the dilution of chemical wastes. Together, these activities have altered Earth's freshwater ecosystems profoundly, to a greater extent than terrestrial ecosystems have been altered. The construction of dams affects biotic habitats indirectly as well; the damming of the Danube River, for example, has altered the silica chemistry of the entire Black Sea. The large number of operational dams (36,000) in the world, in conjunction with the many that are planned, ensure that humanity's effects on aquatic biological systems will continue (24). Where surface water is sparse or over-exploited, humans use groundwater—and in many areas the groundwater that is drawn upon is nonrenewable, or fossil, water (25). For example, three-quarters of the water supply of Saudi Arabia currently comes from fossil water (26).

Alterations to the hydrological cycle can affect regional climate. Irrigation increases atmospheric humidity in semiarid areas, often increasing precipitation and thunderstorm frequency (27). In contrast, land transformation from forest to agriculture or pasture increases albedo and decreases surface roughness; simulations suggest that the net effect of this transformation is to increase temperature and decrease precipita-

tion regionally (7, 26).

Conflicts arising from the global use of water will be exacerbated in the years ahead, with a growing human population and with the stresses that global changes will impose on water quality and availability. Of all of the environmental security issues facing nations, an adequate supply of clean water will be the most important.

Nitrogen. Nitrogen (N) is unique among the major elements required for life, in that its cycle includes a vast atmospheric reservoir (N_2) that must be fixed (combined with carbon, hydrogen, or oxygen) before it can be used by most organisms. The supply of this fixed N controls (at least in part) the productivity, carbon storage, and species composition of many ecosystems. Before the extensive human alteration of the N cycle, 90 to 130 million metric tons of N (Tg N) were fixed biologically on land each year; rates of biological fixation in marine systems are less certain, but perhaps as much was fixed there (28).

Human activity has altered the global cycle of N substantially by fixing N_2 —deliberately for fertilizer and inadvertently during fossil fuel combustion. Industrial fixation of N fertilizer increased from <10 Tg/year in 1950 to 80 Tg/year in 1990; after a brief dip caused by economic dislocations in the former Soviet Union, it is expected to increase to >135 Tg/year by 2030 (29). Cultivation of soybeans, alfalfa, and other legume crops that fix N symbiotically enhances fixation by another ~40 Tg/year, and fossil fuel combustion puts >20 Tg/year of reactive N into the atmosphere globally—some by fixing N_2 , more from the mobilization of N in the fuel. Overall, human activity adds at least as much fixed N to terrestrial ecosystems as do all natural sources combined (Fig. 2), and it mobilizes >50 Tg/year more during land transformation (28, 30).

Alteration of the N cycle has multiple consequences. In the atmosphere, these include (i) an increasing concentration of the greenhouse gas nitrous oxide globally; (ii) substantial increases in fluxes of reactive N gases (two-thirds or more of both nitric oxide and ammonia emissions globally are human-caused); and (iii) a substantial contribution to acid rain and to the photochemical smog that afflicts urban and agricultural areas throughout the world (31). Reactive N that is emitted to the atmosphere is deposited downwind, where it can influence the dynamics of recipient ecosystems. In regions where fixed N was in short supply, added N generally increases productivity and C storage within ecosystems, and ultimately increases losses of N and cations from soils, in a set of processes termed “N saturation” (32). Where added N increases the productivity of

ecosystems, usually it also decreases their biological diversity (33).

Human-fixed N also can move from agriculture, from sewage systems, and from N-saturated terrestrial systems to streams, rivers, groundwater, and ultimately the oceans. Fluxes of N through streams and rivers have increased markedly as human alteration of the N cycle has accelerated; river nitrate is highly correlated with the human population of river basins and with the sum of human-caused N inputs to those basins (8). Increases in river N drive the eutrophication of most estuaries, causing blooms of nuisance and even toxic algae, and threatening the sustainability of marine fisheries (16, 34).

Other cycles. The cycles of carbon, water, and nitrogen are not alone in being altered by human activity. Humanity is also the largest source of oxidized sulfur gases in the atmosphere; these affect regional air quality, biogeochemistry, and climate. Moreover, mining and mobilization of phosphorus and of many metals exceed their natural fluxes; some of the metals that are concentrated and mobilized are highly toxic (including lead, cadmium, and mercury) (35). Beyond any doubt, humanity is a major biogeochemical force on Earth.

Synthetic organic chemicals. Synthetic organic chemicals have brought humanity many beneficial services. However, many are toxic to humans and other species, and some are hazardous in concentrations as low as 1 part per billion. Many chemicals persist in the environment for decades; some are both toxic and persistent. Long-lived organochlorine compounds provide the clearest examples of environmental consequences of persistent compounds. Insecticides such as DDT and its relatives, and industrial compounds like polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), were used widely in North America in the 1950s and 1960s. They were transported globally, accumulated in organisms, and magnified in concentration through food chains; they devastated populations of some predators (notably falcons and eagles) and entered parts of the human food supply in concentrations higher than was prudent. Domestic use of these compounds was phased out in the 1970s in the United States and Canada, and their concentrations declined thereafter. However, PCBs in particular remain readily detectable in many organisms, sometimes approaching thresholds of public health concern (36). They will continue to circulate through organisms for many decades.

Synthetic chemicals need not be toxic to cause environmental problems. The fact that the persistent and volatile chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) are wholly nontoxic contributed to their widespread use as refriger-

ants and even aerosol propellants. The subsequent discovery that CFCs drive the breakdown of stratospheric ozone, and especially the later discovery of the Antarctic ozone hole and their role in it, represent great surprises in global environmental science (37). Moreover, the response of the international political system to those discoveries is the best extant illustration that global environmental change can be dealt with effectively (38).

Particular compounds that pose serious health and environmental threats can be and often have been phased out (although PCB production is growing in Asia). Nonetheless, each year the chemical industry produces more than 100 million tons of organic chemicals representing some 70,000 different compounds, with about 1000 new ones being added annually (39). Only a small fraction of the many chemicals produced and released into the environment are tested adequately for health hazards or environmental impact (40).

Biotic Changes

Human modification of Earth's biological resources—its species and genetically distinct populations—is substantial and growing. Extinction is a natural process, but the current rate of loss of genetic variability, of populations, and of species is far above background rates; it is ongoing; and it represents a wholly irreversible global change. At the same time, human transport of species around Earth is homogenizing Earth's biota, introducing many species into new areas where they can disrupt both natural and human systems.

Losses. Rates of extinction are difficult to determine globally, in part because the majority of species on Earth have not yet been identified. Nevertheless, recent calculations suggest that rates of species extinction are now on the order of 100 to 1000 times those before humanity's dominance of Earth (41). For particular well-known groups, rates of loss are even greater; as many as one-quarter of Earth's bird species have been driven to extinction by human activities over the past two millennia, particularly on oceanic islands (42) (Fig. 2). At present, 11% of the remaining birds, 18% of the mammals, 5% of fish, and 8% of plant species on Earth are threatened with extinction (43). There has been a disproportionate loss of large mammal species because of hunting; these species played a dominant role in many ecosystems, and their loss has resulted in a fundamental change in the dynamics of those systems (44), one that could lead to further extinctions. The largest organisms in marine systems have been affected similarly, by

fishing and whaling. Land transformation is the single most important cause of extinction, and current rates of land transformation eventually will drive many more species to extinction, although with a time lag that masks the true dimensions of the crisis (45). Moreover, the effects of other components of global environmental change—of altered carbon and nitrogen cycles, and of anthropogenic climate change—are just beginning.

As high as they are, these losses of species understate the magnitude of loss of genetic variation. The loss to land transformation of locally adapted populations within species, and of genetic material within populations, is a human-caused change that reduces the resilience of species and ecosystems while precluding human use of the library of natural products and genetic material that they represent (46).

Although conservation efforts focused on individual endangered species have yielded some successes, they are expensive—and the protection or restoration of whole ecosystems often represents the most effective way to sustain genetic, population, and species diversity. Moreover, ecosystems themselves may play important roles in both natural and human-dominated landscapes. For example, mangrove ecosystems protect coastal areas from erosion and provide nurseries for offshore fisheries, but they are threatened by land transformation in many areas.

Invasions. In addition to extinction, humanity has caused a rearrangement of Earth's biotic systems, through the mixing of floras and faunas that had long been isolated geographically. The magnitude of transport of species, termed "biological invasion," is enormous (47); invading species are present almost everywhere. On many islands, more than half of the plant species are nonindigenous, and in many continental areas the figure is 20% or more (48) (Fig. 2).

As with extinction, biological invasion occurs naturally—and as with extinction, human activity has accelerated its rate by orders of magnitude. Land transformation interacts strongly with biological invasion, in that human-altered ecosystems generally provide the primary foci for invasions, while in some cases land transformation itself is driven by biological invasions (49). International commerce is also a primary cause of the breakdown of biogeographic barriers; trade in live organisms is massive and global, and many other organisms are inadvertently taken along for the ride. In freshwater systems, the combination of upstream land transformation, altered hydrology, and numerous deliberate and accidental species introductions has led to particularly wide-

spread invasion, in continental as well as island ecosystems (50).

In some regions, invasions are becoming more frequent. For example, in the San Francisco Bay of California, an average of one new species has been established every 36 weeks since 1850, every 24 weeks since 1970, and every 12 weeks for the last decade (51). Some introduced species quickly become invasive over large areas (for example, the Asian clam in the San Francisco Bay), whereas others become widespread only after a lag of decades, or even over a century (52).

Many biological invasions are effectively irreversible; once replicating biological material is released into the environment and becomes successful there, calling it back is difficult and expensive at best. Moreover, some species introductions have consequences. Some degrade human health and that of other species; after all, most infectious diseases are invaders over most of their range. Others have caused economic losses amounting to billions of dollars; the recent invasion of North America by the zebra mussel is a well-publicized example. Some disrupt ecosystem processes, altering the structure and functioning of whole ecosystems. Finally, some invasions drive losses in the biological diversity of native species and populations; after land transformation, they are the next most important cause of extinction (53).

Conclusions

The global consequences of human activity are not something to face in the future—as Fig. 2 illustrates, they are with us now. All of these changes are ongoing, and in many cases accelerating; many of them were entrenched long before their importance was recognized. Moreover, all of these seemingly disparate phenomena trace to a single cause—the growing scale of the human enterprise. The rates, scales, kinds, and combinations of changes occurring now are fundamentally different from those at any other time in history; we are changing Earth more rapidly than we are understanding it. We live on a human-dominated planet—and the momentum of human population growth, together with the imperative for further economic development in most of the world, ensures that our dominance will increase.

The papers in this special section summarize our knowledge of and provide specific policy recommendations concerning major human-dominated ecosystems. In addition, we suggest that the rate and extent of human alteration of Earth should affect how we think about Earth. It is clear that we control much of Earth, and that our

activities affect the rest. In a very real sense, the world is in our hands—and how we handle it will determine its composition and dynamics, and our fate.

Recognition of the global consequences of the human enterprise suggests three complementary directions. First, we can work to reduce the rate at which we alter the Earth system. Humans and human-dominated systems may be able to adapt to slower change, and ecosystems and the species they support may cope more effectively with the changes we impose, if those changes are slow. Our footprint on the planet (54) might then be stabilized at a point where enough space and resources remain to sustain most of the other species on Earth, for their sake and our own. Reducing the rate of growth in human effects on Earth involves slowing human population growth and using resources as efficiently as is practical. Often it is the waste products and by-products of human activity that drive global environmental change.

Second, we can accelerate our efforts to understand Earth's ecosystems and how they interact with the numerous components of human-caused global change. Ecological research is inherently complex and demanding: It requires measurement and monitoring of populations and ecosystems; experimental studies to elucidate the regulation of ecological processes; the development, testing, and validation of regional and global models; and integration with a broad range of biological, earth, atmospheric, and marine sciences. The challenge of understanding a human-dominated planet further requires that the human dimensions of global change—the social, economic, cultural, and other drivers of human actions—be included within our analyses.

Finally, humanity's dominance of Earth means that we cannot escape responsibility for managing the planet. Our activities are causing rapid, novel, and substantial changes to Earth's ecosystems. Maintaining populations, species, and ecosystems in the face of those changes, and maintaining the flow of goods and services they provide humanity (55), will require active management for the foreseeable future. There is no clearer illustration of the extent of human dominance of Earth than the fact that maintaining the diversity of "wild" species and the functioning of "wild" ecosystems will require increasing human involvement.

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