

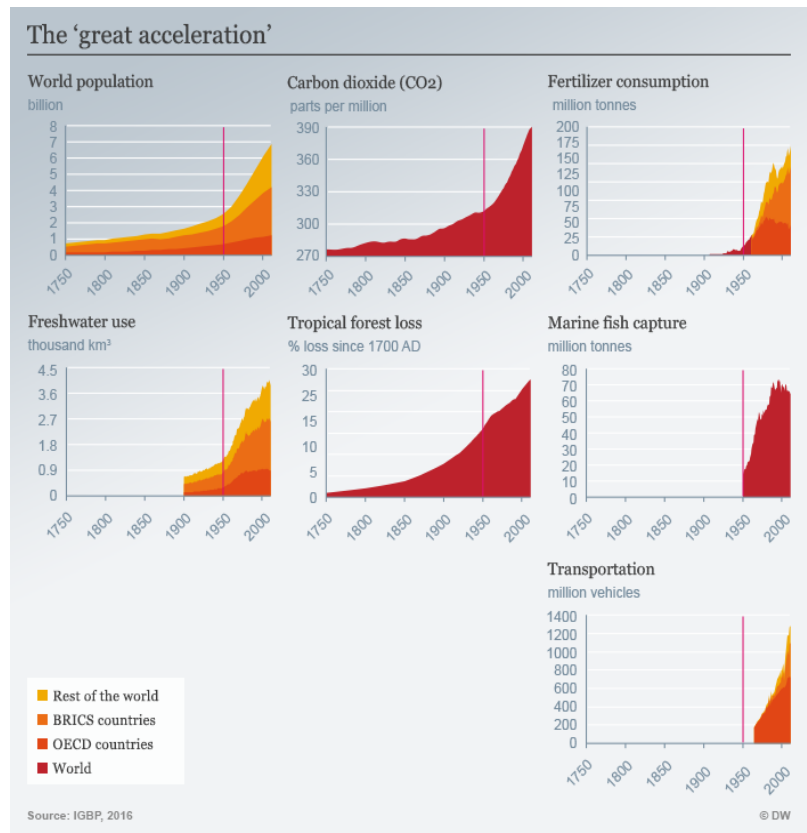
THE ANTHROPOCENE:

Humanity's lasting influence on Earth

The Anthropocene is a new geological epoch that began with the Industrial Revolution and became fully established after World War II, during what is called the 'The Great Acceleration,' when human activities began to alter the state of the planet. The effects of the Anthropocene have already percolated throughout virtually all aspects of the planetary system. Its impacts include rising levels of greenhouse gases, mass extinctions, deforestation, and altered oceanic and atmospheric chemistry.

One predicted consequence of the Anthropocene epoch is that the planet may lose two-thirds of its wild animals by 2020. The impact of this goes far beyond just sentimentality - the interconnectedness of the web of life means all organisms serve an ecological function upon which another relies, so to lose a species is to lose a part of the ecological system which sustains life. The previous epoch - the Holocene - nurtured modern day humanity, as agriculture thrived due to a relatively stable climate; it is the only period we know to be able to sustain contemporary life.

As human pressures mount, and with the global population set to hit 10 billion by 2050, it is clear that the way we live and run our world needs to be reformed. It is time to ensure that the natural earth systems which got us here today are protected from irreversible repair, and most importantly, to support people's rights while doing so.



How can we construct a future that will nurture the needs of the planet while protecting the rights of its vulnerable people in the face of an expanding population?

Strategies for stabilizing the effects of the Anthropocene and securing a sustainable future include the following:

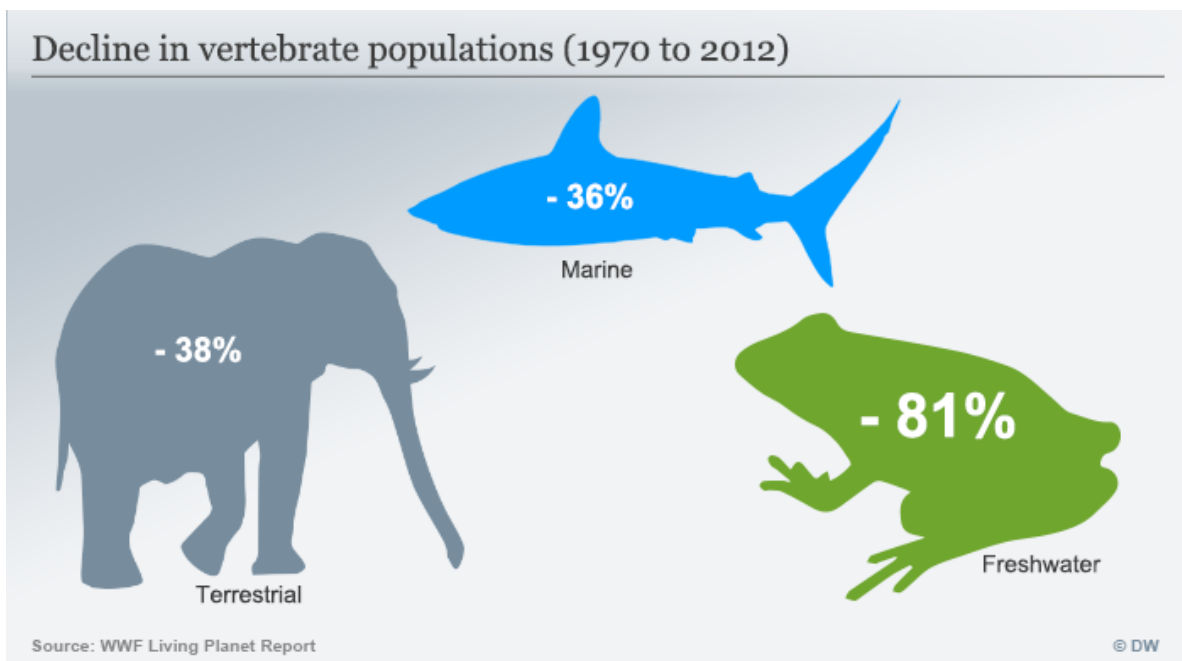
- ❖ Recognizing and protecting the rights of nature
- ❖ Shifting to a sustainable economic system
- ❖ Reducing or eliminating consumption of animal food products
- ❖ Investing in voluntary family planning services

Rights of Nature

In a world where, according to the Living Planet Report 2016, global populations of fish, birds, mammals, amphibians and reptiles declined by 58 per cent between 1970 and 2012, new approaches are needed to save nature.

In 2014 New Zealand passed a law to recognize the Wanganui River as a natural entity with rights, protecting it from threats such as pollution, and in doing so, protecting the abundance of life that the river fosters and the ecosystem services it provides that enhance the well-being of people. Legally recognizing nature as an entity means its rights to be and to thrive are protected, and not simply property to be plundered. As all life is interconnected, this concept protects both wildlife and human well-being and is therefore a promising example for future strategies.

In India, courts have granted rights to the sacred Ganges and Yamuna Rivers as living entities, and rights of nature has been recognized in the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador. Over 100 communities in the U.S. have enacted some type of rights of nature legislation at the local level in an effort to protect both people and the environment from threats such as fracking and toxic sludge waste.



New Economic Systems

The current global economic system is one that demands constant resource consumption and population growth; not surprisingly, this system is unsustainable. While this economic model may have lifted people out of poverty in the past, it is no longer viable, as Earth's resources are limited, which in turn threatens the quality of life for many people and harms the environment.

Alternative models exist that promote healthy communities living within the means of the planet. Steady state economics is the 'sustainable alternative to perpetual economic growth', where population and resource consumption mildly fluctuate or remain stable. In a steady state economy, the constant pressure to create more jobs is reduced as population growth stabilizes, and the jobs that do exist are within enterprises of a more local and sustainable nature. With less outside/foreign influences, jobs and local economies will be stronger and more resilient while contributing to a cleaner and greener world.

Dietary Changes

A shift to a less meat-intensive and more plant-based diet is an effective, tangible way in which an individual can reduce their contribution to planetary degradation. Animal agriculture is far more costly to the environment than plant agriculture, in that it uses more water, land and nutrients, generates more greenhouse gases and waste, and causes greater degradation to land by overgrazing and deforestation for pastures.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, the total area of land dedicated to growing feedcrop for livestock amounts to 33% of all arable land on Earth; the total amount of land used for grazing by livestock itself amounts to 26% of all ice-free terrestrial land. These statistics combined mean that livestock production comprises 70% of all agricultural land use and 30% of all land on the planet - land cleared for food production equals the size of South America and Africa combined. A shift to a more plant-based diet would mean less land and resources to grow more food.

With studies now showing that plant-based diets are linked to lowered risk of heart disease and some cancers, this change in eating habits would benefit people's health as well as the planet.

Invest in Voluntary Family Planning Services

One of the most overlooked but critical solutions for a sustainable future is the need to invest in voluntary family planning services and women's health. Some 214 million women and girls in developing countries who don't want to get pregnant do not use contraception, often due to a lack of access, supplies, money or information. Sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia are home to almost 60 percent of the women who want to avoid pregnancy but cannot access proper contraception. The birth rate in 20 African nations exceeds five children per woman.

Tackling this issue means that women will be able to support healthier families and communities by having a choice of how many children they want in alignment with the resources they have, and will simultaneously help manage population growth.

In countries where communities are facing the problems of climate change and ecological collapse, access to family planning, reproductive rights and education will empower women to confront these challenges, benefitting both their well-being and that of their families, as well as the planet's.

Looking Ahead

Having constructed, reclaimed and drilled our way out of the last epoch and into a new, ecologically impoverished, concrete Anthropocene, it is time to rethink the way we interact with the world in which we live. It is vital that we put efforts into curbing the impacts humans have on the planet so that the Anthropocene does not shift into an environmental state that is hostile to life, something that could happen if changes are not made. This can be done by respecting nature and protecting it, realizing that we are part of a web of life that should be nourished not exploited, shifting away from an economic model based on perpetual growth and consumption, reducing the amount of food obtained from animal sources and investing in voluntary family planning services.