

# Warning Signs for Mankind

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

For some critical problems there are known remedies that could reverse disastrous trends or ameliorate conditions. Take topsoil, for example. The report has concluded that the loss of topsoil over the long term will be a greater constraint on economic expansion than restraints caused by finite supplies of petroleum. Furthermore, losses of topsoil are even greater than the shocking findings of the first "State of the World" report. The accumulated loss of topsoil from croplands now totals 25.4 billion tons. But the adoption of conservation tillage methods, in which crop residues and stubble are left in the fields, already is stabilizing soils in the United States. The technique could be readily applied elsewhere.

## FULL TEXT

The Worldwatch Institute has taken a second look at the "State of the World" and found new reason to be even more concerned about the population growth that is straining resources. It postulates that "human population growth may now be driving climate change."

"Those responsible for family-planning programs will be amazed to learn that their effectiveness-or lack of it-may be altering the climate of their country, perhaps irreversibly," its report says.

The evidence is strongest in Africa. But there are implications for every part of the Earth as tropical forests are depleted, arable lands turned to deserts, temperate-zone forests depleted by overharvesting and pollution.

"Although human activities have always altered the natural environment, the scale of disruptions in the late 20th Century is unprecedented," Lester R. Brown, the project director, concludes.

This is the second annual look at "progress toward a sustainable society," and, like the initial study a year ago, this report tells more about failures than about successes. The words are cautious, the conclusions carefully drawn. But there is no doubt about the meaning of the message: Society as it exists around the world today will not survive unless leaders pay more attention to resources and undertake the costly, complex task of "restoring the natural systems that ultimately sustain all societies."

The year 1984 is starkly measured in the hard statistics of population: 4.76 billion people, an increase of 81 million over the year before, 133 million births, 52 million deaths.

"Against this background, just providing family-planning services may not be enough," Brown finds. "To succeed, a program may have to be an activist one that reaches out and contacts people, that takes information and services to each household." And more: "Given the unprecedented numbers of young people who will reach reproductive age within the next two decades, a generation of one-child families may be the key to restoring a sustained improvement in living standards." In other words, some developing nations may have to choose between the draconian family controls of China and the model of Ethiopia, "where population growth is being checked by famine."

There is much in the report that is chilling, discouraging. In Africa, for example, the report concludes: "There are no developments in prospect on either the agriculture or the family-planning side of the food/population equation that will arrest the slide in per-capita food production." And, on a world scale, the report finds: "Global economic growth during the '80s is scarcely keeping pace with that of population, a sharp contrast with the situation from 1950 to 1973."

But for some critical problems there are known remedies that could reverse disastrous trends or ameliorate conditions. Take topsoil, for example. The report has concluded that the loss of topsoil over the long term will be a greater constraint on economic expansion than restraints caused by finite supplies of petroleum. Furthermore, losses of topsoil are even greater than the shocking findings of the first "State of the World" report. The accumulated loss of topsoil from croplands now totals 25.4 billion tons. But the adoption of conservation tillage methods, in which crop residues and stubble are left in the fields, already is stabilizing soils in the United States. The technique could be readily applied elsewhere.

"The State of the World 1985" is important, a worthy addition to the many contributions made by Worldwatch in sounding alarms and identifying problems. Fortunately, the report is available in bookstores, and that may help. No one can read it and ignore the warning signs for mankind.

## DETAILS

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