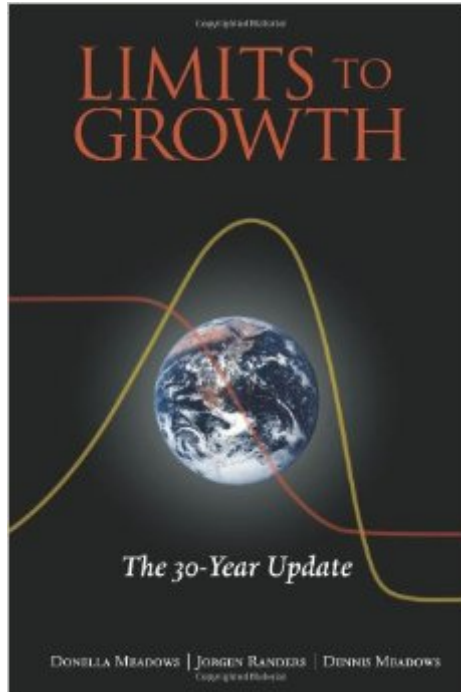


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Limits To Growth: The 30-Year Update



Synopsis

In 1972, three scientists from MIT created a computer model that analyzed global resource consumption and production. Their results shocked the world and created stirring conversation about global 'overshoot,' or resource use beyond the carrying capacity of the planet. Now, preeminent environmental scientists Donella Meadows, Jorgen Randers, and Dennis Meadows have teamed up again to update and expand their original findings in *The Limits to Growth: The 30 Year Global Update*. Meadows, Randers, and Meadows are international environmental leaders recognized for their groundbreaking research into early signs of wear on the planet. Citing climate change as the most tangible example of our current overshoot, the scientists now provide us with an updated scenario and a plan to reduce our needs to meet the carrying capacity of the planet. Over the past three decades, population growth and global warming have forged on with a striking semblance to the scenarios laid out by the World3 computer model in the original *Limits to Growth*. While Meadows, Randers, and Meadows do not make a practice of predicting future environmental degradation, they offer an analysis of present and future trends in resource use, and assess a variety of possible outcomes. In many ways, the message contained in *Limits to Growth: The 30-Year Update* is a warning. Overshoot cannot be sustained without collapse. But, as the authors are careful to point out, there is reason to believe that humanity can still reverse some of its damage to Earth if it takes appropriate measures to reduce inefficiency and waste. Written in refreshingly accessible prose, *Limits to Growth: The 30-Year Update* is a long anticipated revival of some of the original voices in the growing chorus of sustainability. *Limits to Growth: The 30 Year Update* is a work of stunning intelligence that will expose for humanity the hazy but critical line between human growth and human development.

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Customer Reviews

In the Authors' Preface, they provide important background information to their "30-Year Update": Published in 1972, "The Limits to Growth (LTG) reported that global ecological constraints (related to resource use and emissions) would have significant influence on global developments in the twenty-first century. LTG warned that humanity might have to divert much capital and manpower to battle these constraints -- possibly so much that the average quality of life would decline sometime during the twenty-first century." Then in 1992, the authors conducted a 20-year update of their original study and published the results in Beyond the Limits. "In BTL we studied global developments between 1970 and 1990 and used the information to update the LTG and the World3 computer model. BTL repeated the same message: In 1992 we concluded that two decades of history mainly supported the conclusions we had advanced 20 years earlier." However, BTL (1992) offered one new finding: "...humanity had already overshoot the limits of Earth's support capacity. This fact was so important that we chose to reflect it in the title of the book." If you have not already read one or both of the two earlier volumes, these brief excerpts from the Authors' Preface to Limits to Growth: The 30-Year Update will suggest a context within which to understand and appreciate the significance of what Meadows, Randers, and Meadows share in this third volume. If I understand their key point, it is this: Humanity's consumption of Earth's resources (i.e. humanity's "ecological footprint") proceeds at an increasingly faster rate than Earth's available resources can accommodate (i.e. its "carrying capacity").

No one likes limits, but they're with us all our lives, from the restrictions our parents place on us as children to the limits that society and Mother Nature compel us to adhere to as adults. The authors do a clear and thorough job of explaining how physical limits affect the Earth and the human society evolving within it. Updating their mathematical model and learning from three decades of experience since the original 1972 study, the authors reinforce their earlier finding that persistently overshooting the Earth's carrying capacity could lead to any one of a variety of unhappy scenarios for humanity. While expressing due respect for technology development and the effects of free markets, they emphasize that these are necessary but not sufficient tools for getting us through the 21st century. The authors have been criticized as doomsayers whose predictions have proven wrong.

Such criticism obviously has come from people who have not actually read their work. They have not produced just a single computer run of their model and then proclaimed, "This is what will happen." They have done hundreds of runs to attempt to illustrate how important variables - such as population growth, industrial production, technological development, and pollution - interact to shape future scenarios in a 100-year timeframe. A thorough reading of this book demonstrates that rather than being disproven, their original scenarios are looking ominously accurate. Chapter 5 is the book's good-news story, providing a case study on how the world got together to tackle the ozone depletion problem over the last quarter century. This and the final two chapters demonstrate that the authors have not given in to hopelessness. The most critical shortcoming of the authors' work is one they clearly acknowledge.

Limits to Growth: The 30-Year Update is a look at the resources of the planet and how they are being used, using the tools of systems dynamics computer modeling, with an eye to seeing if the current practices of unchecked growth in the use of resources is a viable, sustainable approach to living (an idea that on its face appears to be an obvious no-brainer). The authors have produced two prior books on these issues, *Limits to Growth* and *Beyond the Limits*. The central questions are these: Are current policies leading to a sustainable future, or collapse? What can be done to create a human economy that provides sufficiently for all? They quote another researcher who points out that humanity surpassed sustainability in the 1980s, a statement that is congruent with their computer modeling. The basic idea is that resource use will exceed resource capacity, a condition called overshoot, which will lead to collapse of many of the institutions of humanity, as we know them. They define a sustainable society as one that 'meets the needs of the present, without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.' Sounds very similar to the current state of the social security program, which will be bankrupt in the near future, without major changes. One major limit to the consumption of resources that is often not considered, are 'sinks', methods, ways and places of disposing of waste products generated by humanity. The authors make this a focus by using a phrase called 'ecological footprint of humanity', defined as 'the land area that would be required to provide the resources (grain, feed, wood, fish, and urban land) and absorb the emissions (carbon dioxide) of global society.'

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