

*State of the World 2015*

**CONFRONTING**  
**HIDDEN THREATS**  
*to*  
**SUSTAINABILITY**



**THE WORLDWATCH INSTITUTE**

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*State of the World 2015*

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# Confronting Hidden Threats to Sustainability

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# Introduction

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# The Seeds of Modern Threats

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*Michael Renner*

On September 21, 2014, an estimated 400,000 people marched in New York City to demand that government leaders assembling in that city for a “climate summit” finally move from rhetoric to action. It was the largest of more than 2,600 protest events worldwide. The marches were the culmination of decades of growing climate activism that got its start soon after Dr. James Hansen put climate change on the political map. On a fittingly sweltering day in June 1988, Hansen—then the director of NASA’s Goddard Institute for Space Studies—testified before the U.S. Senate’s Energy and Natural Resources Committee that global warming was not a natural phenomenon, but rather was caused by human activities that triggered a buildup of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere.<sup>1</sup>

Hansen was far from the first scientist to theorize about human-induced climate change. Such studies go back as far as the late nineteenth century, but by the 1960s and 1970s, scientists started to view the warming potential of gases like carbon dioxide as increasingly convincing. In February 1979, the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) concluded in its “Declaration of the World Climate Conference” that “it appears plausible that an increased amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere can contribute to a gradual warming of the lower atmosphere. . . . It is possible that some effects on regional and global scale may be detectable before the end of this century and become significant before the middle of the next century.” By the 1980s, the pace of climate studies quickened, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was set up in 1988 by the WMO and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).<sup>2</sup>

It was Hansen, however, who conveyed an unmistakable sense of urgency, telling the assembled senators in 1988: “It’s time to stop waffling so much and say that the evidence is pretty strong that the greenhouse effect is here.” Yet his testimony marked merely the beginning of a protracted struggle to get governments, corporations, and society at large to understand that humanity’s own actions had brought about a challenge unlike any other—and then to act on that understanding.<sup>3</sup>

**Michael Renner** is a senior researcher at the Worldwatch Institute and codirector of *State of the World 2015*.



NASA

James Hansen testifying in 1988.



Ben Powless

Hansen getting arrested at a civic protest in 2011.

During the past quarter century, much has indeed changed. From Hansen's early findings, climate modeling became ever more sophisticated, observational work multiplied, and scientific consensus solidified. The world's governments came together in 1992 and set up the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the starting shot for a process of annual "conferences of the parties" (COPs) charged with negotiating a global climate treaty. Climate change, once the preserve of very few specialists, has become a household word. The number of studies and reports on climate impact and possible solutions has mushroomed. By late 2013, the IPCC concluded that it "is extremely likely that human influence has been the dominant cause of the observed warming since the mid-twentieth century."<sup>4</sup>

However, lofty rhetoric has far outpaced action. Climate negotiations have failed to deliver anything close to the breakthrough agreement that the world desperately needs. Hansen's own sense of increasing urgency moved him from scientific inquiry toward activism in recent years. He was even arrested a few times at high-profile civic protests.

Strangely, we now find ourselves in an era of "sustainababble"—marked by wildly proliferating claims of sustainability. Even as adjectives like "low-carbon," "climate-neutral," "environmentally friendly," and "green" abound, there is a remarkable absence of meaningful tests for whether particular governmental and corporate actions actually merit such descriptions.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, powerful fossil fuel interests have mobilized with great effectiveness to thwart action amid all this hot air, sowing doubt and confusion about climate science, and opposing or delaying effective policy making. It brings to mind a quote from author Upton Sinclair, who once exclaimed that, "It is difficult to get a man to understand something, when his salary depends upon his not understanding it!"<sup>6</sup>

Endless economic growth driven by unbridled consumption is so central to modern economies and is so ingrained in the thinking of corporate and political leaders that environmental action is still often seen as in conflict with the economy, and is relegated to inferior status. We have an economic system

that is the equivalent of a great white shark: it needs to keep water moving through its gills to receive oxygen, and dies if it stops moving. The challenge, therefore, is broader than merely a set of technological changes. As activist Naomi Klein has argued, saving the climate requires revisiting the central mechanisms of the world's pre-eminent economic system: capitalism.<sup>7</sup>

Shying away from such radical change, governments and international agencies are lining up behind “green growth”—a concept that reaffirms the centrality of economic growth and avoids any critique of the underlying dynamics that have brought human civilization to the edge of the abyss. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), “green growth means fostering economic growth and development while ensuring that natural assets continue to provide the resources and environmental services on which our well-being relies.”<sup>8</sup>

Humanity's climate predicament is only the latest—if by far the most challenging—manifestation of its collision course with planetary limits. Ecological stress is evident in many ways, from species loss, air and water pollution, and deforestation to coral reef die-offs, fisheries depletion, and wetland losses. The planet's capacity to absorb waste and pollutants is increasingly taxed.

The *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment* found that even a decade ago, more than 60 percent of the world's major ecosystem goods and services were degraded or used unsustainably. Some 52 percent of commercial fish stocks are now fully exploited, about 20 percent are overexploited, and 8 percent are depleted. The number of oxygen-depleted dead zones in the world's oceans that cannot support marine life has doubled each decade since the 1960s; in 2008, there were more than 400 such zones, affecting an area equivalent in size to the United Kingdom. The decline of bees and other pollinators is jeopardizing agricultural crops and ecosystems. Urban air pollution causes millions of premature deaths each year. The World Health Organization recently revised its estimates of global deaths from air pollution to about 7 million people in 2012—more than double previous estimates and making air pollution the world's single worst environmental health risk.<sup>9</sup>

## A Double-edged Sword

How did we get to this moment in time? The onset of agriculture was the first major marker of humanity's rising claim on the planet's resources, followed by the Industrial Revolution starting in the late eighteenth century. According to environmental historian J. R. McNeill, shifting agriculture improved caloric intake and thus increased energy availability perhaps 10-fold over what was available to hunter-gatherer societies. Settled agriculture provided another 10-fold increase, and domesticated animals (oxen, horses, etc.) offered concentrated muscle power for transport and plowing of fields. These were the beginnings of an—albeit still modest—energy surplus.<sup>10</sup>

It was the Industrial Revolution that increased that surplus beyond anything seen before, and that allowed humans to dominate Earth's biophysical systems. The invention of the steam engine permitted industrializing societies to tap coal as the primary energy source, replacing and augmenting the muscle power of humans and their domesticated animals. By 1900, steam engines had become 30 times as powerful as the first machines of around 1800. Then, by the late nineteenth century, internal combustion engines made their appearance, more efficient and powerful than steam engines, allowing for the generation of electricity and offering a means of mass transport.<sup>11</sup>

The period since the advent of the Industrial Revolution has seen astonishing scientific and technical advances. Whereas just 10 scientific journals were published in the mid-1700s, today the number is in the tens of thousands, with estimates ranging from 25,000 to 40,000. Perhaps some 5

million scientific articles have been published since the beginning of the Industrial Revolution, with an estimated 1.4 million to 1.8 million articles published annually. Although hard to measure, one study estimated that scientific publications may be growing at an annual rate of 8–9 percent, up from just 2–3 percent during the period from the mid-eighteenth century to 1945, and less than 1 percent prior to the middle of the eighteenth century.<sup>12</sup>

The second half of the twentieth century, in particular, ushered in an unprecedented degree of progress in many fields, with tremendous gains in health, food availability, material well-being, and life spans. Yet these advances came at great cost to the planet's ecosystems and resources. Technical advances were often pursued single-mindedly, with little sense of restraint or long-term wisdom that might consider the repercussions for the natural world. Science, in other words, is a double-edged sword: it underpins the breathtaking progress that modern societies now take for granted, but it also enables the process that turns every last resource of the planet into a commodity.<sup>13</sup>

To a large extent, this is the result of large evolutionary forces—the genetic, developmental, and cultural factors that influence and determine human behavior. Humanity's ability to marshal the earth's resources, along with the economic and political competition that drives governments, corporations, and individuals, has meant that there have been few—if any—constraining factors on human actions. This lack of constraint may be the biggest threat to human survival. As J. R. McNeill observed, “The same characteristics that underwrote our long-term biological success—adaptability and cleverness—have lately permitted us to erect a highly specialized fossil fuel-based civilization that is ecologically disruptive that it guarantees surprises and shocks.”<sup>14</sup>

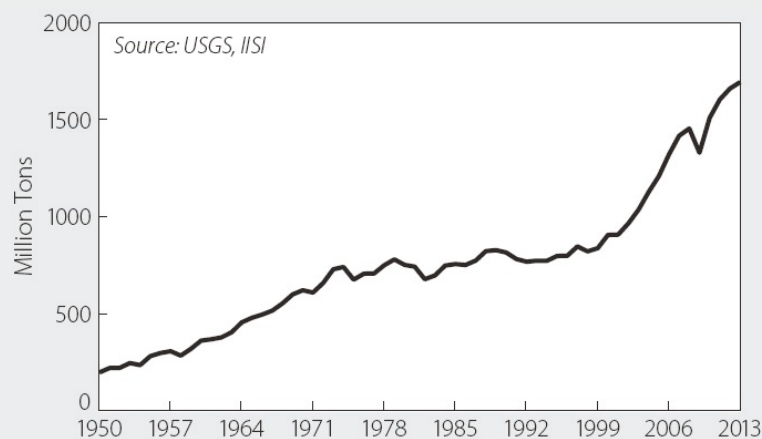
The industrial era's innumerable discoveries and inventions were underwritten by cheap and plentiful fossil energy. Humans used perhaps 10 times as much energy during the twentieth century as they did in the 1,000 years before. Coal, oil, and natural gas not only pack far more energy than traditional sources like wood, but their versatility allows them to be used for many different purposes such as heating and cooling, industrial processes, electricity, and diverse forms of transport.<sup>15</sup>

World coal extraction shot up from about 10 million tons in 1800 to 762 million tons by 1900. It reached 4,700 million tons in 2000, and then climbed to almost 7,900 million tons in 2013—a more than 10-fold increase since 1900. World oil production started only in the late nineteenth century, but grew rapidly from 20 million tons in 1900 to 3,260 million tons in 2000, and to 4,130 million tons in 2013—a 207-fold expansion since 1900.<sup>16</sup>

Pre-industrial societies relied on a limited range and quantity of materials, with wood, ceramic, cotton, wool, and leather playing major roles. By contrast, industrialized societies use tens of thousands of versatile materials drawn from the entirety of naturally occurring elements. Materials like plastics or aluminum are ubiquitous nowadays (generating convenience as much as pollution), but they had their beginnings only in the late nineteenth century.<sup>17</sup>

Metals have long been used by humans, but their application on a mass scale is a relatively recent phenomenon. World metals production rose from 30 million tons in 1900 to 198 million tons in 1950. After reaching 740 million tons in 1974, output leveled off for the next 20 years. But then came another phase of rapid growth, driven principally by economic expansion in China, and production reached 1.7 billion tons in 2013. (See [Figure 1–1](#).) The bulk of this figure is accounted for by steel production, which expanded 55.8-fold since 1900 and 8-fold since 1950. Aluminum production grew 32-fold since 1950, copper and zinc 6- to 7-fold, and lead and gold about 3-fold.<sup>18</sup>

Figure 1–1. World Metals Production, 1950–2013



Chemical compounds have become ubiquitous to the point that a 2013 UNEP report noted, “There is hardly any industry where chemical substances are not used, and there is no single economic sector where chemicals do not play an important role.” Roughly 10 million chemical compounds have been synthesized since 1900, with some 150,000 or so put to commercial use—although nobody knows the exact number. The global chemical industry’s output climbed from \$171 billion in 1970 to over \$4 trillion in 2010 (expressed in nominal dollars). World chemical sales more than doubled during just the last decade, again due mostly to China, where output nearly tripled.<sup>19</sup>

New chemicals keep getting introduced into commerce each year—an average of 700 in the United States alone. The rising number of compounds, their increasing complexity, and an ever more intricate supply chain is giving rise to concerns that poor management of chemicals could pose substantial dangers to the health of communities and ecosystems. The industry is a perfect example of the mix of benefits and hidden threats that is so characteristic of the modern age.<sup>20</sup>

Increased use of synthetic fertilizers has been a key aspect of today’s industrialized agriculture (along with high energy and water use and inputs like pesticides). In 1940, the world used about 10 million tons of fertilizer. By 2000, the figure reached 137 million tons, and by 2013, about 179 million tons. As J. R. McNeill reminds us, without fertilizers, “the world’s population would need about 30 percent more good cropland.” Massive use of synthetic fertilizers led to widespread water pollution. It also helped consolidate food production to a limited number of crops that responded well to applications of fertilizer, leading to widespread monocultures. And fertilizer production is highly energy intensive, part of the industrialization of agriculture.<sup>21</sup>

One of the areas in which the consequences of industrialization show up most dramatically is air quality. For most of human history, air pollution was of a local and limited nature, but during the twentieth century, it grew exponentially as heating, power generation, metal smelting, motorized transportation, waste incineration, and other human activities mushroomed.

Automobiles provide extraordinary individual mobility, but they have been a major contributor to urban air pollution. From fewer than 10,000 in 1900, 8 million cars rolled off the world’s assembly lines in 1950, a number that skyrocketed to 85 million in 2013. From perhaps 25,000 cars on the world’s roads in 1900 and less than 1 million in 1910, the global automobile fleet was close to 1 billion in 1960 and crossed the 1 billion threshold in 2013.<sup>22</sup>

# Pollution Control and New Growth Impulses

Massive air pollution was one of the signature issues for a budding modern environmental movement in the early 1970s, which eventually prodded governments in industrialized countries to adopt pollution control measures and to compel industry to develop more-efficient production technologies. In the United States, sulfur dioxide emissions were cut by 83 percent between 1970 and 2013, carbon monoxide emissions declined by 64 percent, nitrogen oxides by 51 percent, and volatile organic compounds by 49 percent. Better controls and more-efficient technologies also helped reduce emissions of metals like copper and lead, although they remained far above the levels of a century earlier. (See [Table 1–1](#).)<sup>23</sup>

Table 1–1. World Metal Emissions to the Atmosphere, 1901–1990

Period	Cadmium	Copper	Lead	Nickel	Zinc
	annual average, in thousands of tons				
1901–1910	0.9	5.3	47	0.8	39
1951–1960	3.4	23	270	14	150
1971–1980	7.4	59	430	42	330
1981–1990	5.9	47	340	33	260

Source: See [endnote 23](#).

During the final quarter of the twentieth century, pollution control, greater efficiency, and a degree of material saturation in the Western economies slowed further growth of production and consumption. But since the 1990s, globalization and the rise of China and a number of other “emerging economies” provided a whole new impulse for industrial development and resource use. A rising middle class in these nations started to imitate Western lifestyles, and industrial production relocated increasingly to these countries. China alone now accounts for just under half of the world’s steel production, up from only 5 percent in 1980 (when worldwide production was less than half what it is now).<sup>24</sup>

The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro was a milestone in global environmental consciousness. Yet in the two decades since then, the pressures on the planet’s natural resources and ecological systems have only increased, and the second Rio conference—“Rio+20” in 2012—was far less of an environmental milestone. (See [Table 1–2](#).) The production of energy-intensive materials—cement, plastics, and steel—has more than doubled since 1992, far outstripping overall economic growth. Global resource extraction—of fossil fuels, metals, minerals, and biomass—grew 50 percent in the 25 years between 1980 and 2005, to about 58 billion tons of raw materials (and another 40 billion tons of material removed simply to gain access to coveted resources).<sup>25</sup>

## Recognizing and Acting on Unexpected Threats

Being science-based, modern societies eventually come to learn about the unexpected and sometimes unintended consequences of turning ever-greater portions of the planet’s natural base into commodities. We have gradually come to comprehend that we are depleting resources at unsustainable rates, spreading dangerous pollutants, undermining ecosystems, and threatening to unhinge the planet’s climate balance.



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