



# earth at risk

from the Sisters of the Holy Cross Congregation Justice Committee  
and the Holy Cross International Justice Office

Faced with the widespread destruction of the environment, people everywhere are coming to understand that we cannot continue to use the goods of the earth as we have in the past. . . . The ecological crisis is a moral issue.

John Paul II  
The Ecological Crisis: A Common Responsibility

The earth is in danger. Daily, evidence mounts that humans are straining the planet's very capacity to sustain life. Our misuse of resources and economic maldevelopment is radically altering the earth, unbalancing its intricate ecological systems.

### « Global climate is changing »

The 14 warmest years on record occurred in the last two decades. If such trends continue, the Arctic will be a navigable ocean in just 50 years! Most scientists now agree that we humans are the primary cause of this warming. Our overuse of fossil fuels and rampant deforestation are overwhelming the earth's ability to absorb carbon dioxide — thickening the “greenhouse” of gases shielding the planet and disturbing heat flows between earth and space.

Scientists warn that rising temperatures will have grave consequences: record heat waves, increasingly destructive storms, massive ice melts, and rising seas. The U.N.'s 2001 report on climate change indicates sea level could rise as much as a meter during this century. If this occurs, low-lying coastal areas will be devastated. Bangladesh, for example, will lose half its rice production capacity.

### « Water supplies are shrinking »

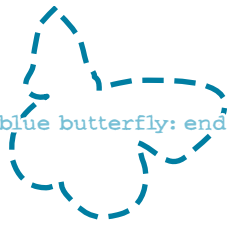
Continuing population growth and agricultural/industrial overuse are creating a water-scarce world. Nearly 40 percent of the earth's people currently face serious water shortages. Many major rivers, like the Nile, the Ganges, and the Colorado, now run dry part of the year and water tables are falling on every continent.

### « Ecosystems are fraying »

Seemingly endless human needs and wants are gutting earth's ecosystems:

- \* Roughly 70 percent of oceanic fish stocks are either depleted from overfishing or being fished at their biological limits. This has serious consequences for those among the world's poor who depend on subsistence fishing.
- \* Demands for paper, firewood, and lumber, together with conversion of forested land to agricultural use, are causing massive deforestation. In the past 100 years, the earth's forests have shrunk by 42 percent. Loss of forest cover is, in turn, generating other environmental problems, including desertification, flooding, water pollution, and loss of biodiversity.

(fender's blue butterfly: endangered)



- \* At least 65 percent of the world's cropland is degraded to some degree. In many developing countries, pressures to expand food production have forced farmers into marginal areas, plowing land too dry or steeply sloped for cultivation. Mexico is losing 1,036 square kilometers of farmland to desertification each year. Soil erosion is expected to reduce Africa's grain harvest by 16 percent over the next 20 years.

## << Species are vanishing >>

As human population continues to grow, the number of species who share the planet is plummeting. By conservative estimates, roughly 20 percent of all living species became extinct over the last 25 years. Humans can no longer separate our fate from that of other beings on earth. If earth's rich biodiversity is continually depleted, our lives too will be diminished and may ultimately become unlivable.

### THREATENED BY EXTINCTION

- \* 12 percent of all species of birds
- \* 24 percent of all species of mammals
- \* 30 percent of all species of fish

## << ROOTS OF THE CRISIS >>

At the heart of the ecological crisis lie four destructive forces: an unsustainable economic system, excessive and unjust consumption patterns, escalating population growth, and a worldview that sets humans above and apart from the rest of creation.

### << An eco-blind economy >>

The present global economy is ravaging the earth.

Predicated on the primacy of profits and never-ending growth, the current economy ignores the inherent limits of the earth's ecosystem — overharvesting renewable resources, rapidly depleting nonrenewables, and emitting excessive wastes the earth cannot assimilate.

Burning coal, oil, and natural gas to meet energy needs adds more than 6 billion tons of carbon to the atmosphere each year. Carbon dioxide levels are now 32 percent higher than preindustrial levels — the highest in possibly 20 million years! Yet governments and corporations remain addicted to artificially cheap fossil fuels and resist investment in clean, climate-friendly energy technologies.

The existing economy is based on a linear model of production: materials go from nature to product to landfill. To guarantee endless “growth,” corporations have seized on schemes like disposable products and planned obsolescence. The result is a throwaway economy that needlessly depletes resources and defiles the earth with toxic wastes.

### << Rampant overconsumption >>

An economy premised on limitless growth demands ever-expanding consumption. On the whole, citizens of wealthier, industrialized nations have accommodated — uncritically adopting a life-style that consumes a socially unjust and environmentally unsustainable quantity of earth's resources. Each year,



the 20 percent of earth's people in high-income countries use 75 percent of the world's resources and produce 80 percent of the world's waste. Chicago, for example, with 3 million people consumes as much raw material each year as the 97 million people of Bangladesh.

### WORLD CONSUMPTION PATTERNS

#### The richest fifth

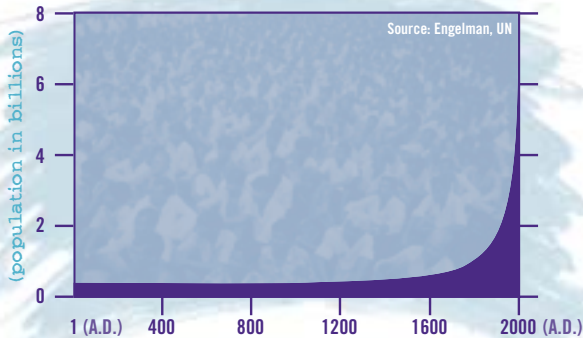
Consume **45%** of all meat/fish  
Use **84%** of all paper  
Use **58%** of total energy  
Account for **53%** of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions

#### The poorest fifth

Consume **5%** of all meat/fish  
Use **1.1%** of all paper  
Use **4%** of total energy  
Account for **3%** of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions

### «Burgeoning population»

More people have been added to the world's population since 1950 than during the previous 4 million years! Despite the obvious social, political, and environmental stresses accompanying continuing growth, the United Nations projects that today's global population of 6.2 billion will grow to 9.3 billion by 2050. Moreover, all of the 3.1 billion additional people will be added in countries least able to support increased population.



### «A distorted worldview»

The ultimate cause of earth's ecological crisis is a distorted perception of humans' relationship to the earth and other species. For much of recorded history, particularly since the Scientific Revolution, we have envisioned ourselves as the summit of creation — the rightful “owners” of earth, separate from and superior to all other beings. Within this paradigm, humans are *entitled* to dominate the earth and its resources, to use them however seems fit. Earth and other life-forms have no rights or intrinsic worth; their value lies solely in usefulness to us.

## « MENDING THE EARTH »

To restore earth's vitality, each of us must change, but individual changes will not be enough. The environmental deterioration of the earth is severe and complex; it can only be remedied by reducing our impact as a *species*. This means changing our systems and structures and transforming our view of the world.



## << Creating an eco-economy >>

It is increasingly obvious that the current global economy is not sustainable. To protect the prospects of all life on earth, we must create a different kind of economic system — one that acknowledges and respects basic principles of ecology, including

- \* nature's need for balance,
- \* earth's reliance on restorative cycles,
- \* the necessity of diversity, and
- \* the interdependence of all of earth's beings and systems.

Creating an economy that takes seriously the needs of the earth and of future generations will involve monumental changes in our economic lives. Among the most crucial will be

- \* a shift from reliance on fossil fuels to wind, solar, and geothermal energy sources;
- \* a shift from linear "throwaway" models of production to a closed loop "reuse/recycle model"; and
- \* a shift from "profits-first" overuse of resources to sustainable management of water, air, soil, forests, and all natural capital.

## << Greening consumption >>

If all people lived like middle-class U.S. citizens, we would require the resources of at least *three* planets the size and wealth of earth. To live sustainably and equitably, we must all challenge dominant consumption patterns. Citizens of the global North must change the types of resources they use, the ways they use them, and the amounts they consume. Citizens of the global South must resist pressures to imitate the North and create different models of development that eliminate poverty *and* protect the environment.

## << Stabilizing population >>

Given diminishing resources and earth's debilitated condition, human population growth must be controlled. Failing to achieve this will mean not only deepening ecological stress, but unnecessary human suffering. Increasingly, demographers and population analysts agree that one of the surest ways to stabilize population is improving the conditions of women — expanding access to education and health care, fostering economic independence, and increasing decision-making power in the family and the community.

## << Relearning our place in the universe >>

The most foundational step humans can take to restore the earth is remembering our place in the universe. We are, as Genesis teaches us, "earth creatures" — not above the earth and its ecosystems, but part of them. We are one species among many; all are interdependent and vital to the whole. Earth and its resources do not belong to our kind. They are not objects to be manipulated and used without consequence, but subjects to be engaged and revered. All of us — mountains, streams, plants, animals, and humans — form a single *earth community*. No part of this community can long flourish if others are injured or destroyed.





## ((What Can We Do?))

- 1) **Learn how the global economy can be restructured to respect earth's ecosystems.** Read Lester Brown's groundbreaking book *Eco-Economy: Building an Economy for the Earth* which can be found at [www.earth-policy.org/Books/index.htm](http://www.earth-policy.org/Books/index.htm). This book will be available in French, Spanish, and Portuguese within the coming year.
- 2) **Examine your personal consumption patterns — minimize your ecological impact!**
  - \* Calculate your personal *ecological footprint* — your impact on the earth based on your consumption patterns: [www.earthday.net/footprint.stm](http://www.earthday.net/footprint.stm) (multi-country and multilingual) or [www.rco.on.ca/ecofootprintfrench.html](http://www.rco.on.ca/ecofootprintfrench.html) (Canada, French)
  - \* Reflect on your life-style using *How Earth-Friendly Are You? A Lifestyle Self-Assessment Questionnaire*: [www.newroadmap.org/hefay/asp](http://www.newroadmap.org/hefay/asp).
- 3) **Green your consumption** by purchasing earth-friendly products. Avoid disposables; buy goods that can be reused or recycled. Information on ecologically friendly products is available at:
  - \* *Co-op America's Green Pages*: [www.greenpages.org](http://www.greenpages.org) (United States/Canada)
  - \* *Environmental Choice Program* (Canada): [www.environmentalchoice.com](http://www.environmentalchoice.com) (French and English)
- 4) **Find and use your local ecological resources.** Many communities provide recycling services, composting programs, water and air monitoring services, and other resources to help us live more gently on the earth.
- 5) **Become an advocate for the earth!** Join an environmental organization in your country; support their legislative initiatives and monitor your country's environmental performance.
- 6) **Follow this year's *World Summit on Sustainable Development*** to be held in South Africa August 26–September 4, 2002: [www.johannesburgsummit.org](http://www.johannesburgsummit.org). At this conference, countries will make commitments to develop and implement ecologically sustainable policies/practices. Find out what commitments your country makes and monitor its progress at implementation.
- 7) **Watch for more information on the ecological crisis and ways to respond on the HCIJO web site ([www.holycrossjustice.org](http://www.holycrossjustice.org)) and in future issues of the HCIJO newsletter *Perspectives!***





## ((Resources))

### Web Sites

**The Earth Charter Initiative** <[www.earthcharter.org](http://www.earthcharter.org)> is the official site of the Earth Charter — a declaration of fundamental principles for building a just, sustainable, and peaceful global society. The Earth Charter is available in over 25 languages at this site; the site itself is in English and Spanish.

**Friends of the Earth International** <[www.foei.org](http://www.foei.org)> includes links to over 60 national FOE groups throughout the world. FOEI campaigns on environmental and social issues and works to promote sustainable practices. National FOE web sites are available in many languages.

**Canadian Environmental Law Association** <[www.cela.ca](http://www.cela.ca)> uses the legal system to safeguard the environment and public health. CELA provides information, research, legal advice, and educational materials to address environmental issues and problems.

**World Resources Institute** <[www.wri.org](http://www.wri.org)> is an environmental think tank which provides extensive information about earth's ecosystems (click on *Earth Trends*), as well as practical solutions to global environmental problems. The site is available in English and Spanish.

### Books



**State of the World (2002 Edition)**, Linda Starke, ed., W.W. Norton and Company, New York. This annual progress report on movements toward a sustainable society is available from the Worldwatch Institute <[www.worldwatch.org](http://www.worldwatch.org)>



**World Resources 2000–2001— People and Ecosystems: The Fraying Web of Life**, prepared by the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Environment Programme, the World Bank, and the World Resources Institute, is a guide to the global environment, including an assessment of five major ecosystems. A French edition is available for purchase from Editions Eska, 12, rue du Quatre-Septembre, 75002 Paris, France <[www.eska.fr](http://www.eska.fr)>.



**The No-Nonsense Guide to Climate Change**, Dinyar Godrej, New Internationalist Publications, Toronto, 2001. This guide presents the impact of climate change on earth's inhabitants and natural systems and also analyzes the politics of climate change and proposed solutions.



**The Great Work: Our Way into the Future**, Thomas Berry, Bell Tower, New York, 1999. Berry, a cultural historian and major spokesperson for the earth, urges humans to move from being a disrupting force to a benign presence on the earth.

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Resources continued >>

Videos



**Bill Moyers Reports: Earth on Edge** looks at five different ecosystems around the world, describing human impact on these systems and behavioral changes that can restore them. Produced by Public Broadcasting System, 2001. (2 hours)



**Sacred Land, Scarred Land** visits four communities of Aboriginal peoples throughout the world to hear stories of their struggles to maintain land rights, livelihoods, and cultural identities in the face of corporate intrusion. Produced by the Canadian Ecumenical Jubilee Initiative, 2000. (18 minutes)

*These videos (available in VHS and PAL) may be borrowed free of charge from the Sisters of the Holy Cross Justice Resource Library (e-mail: [ksmedley@cscsisters.org](mailto:ksmedley@cscsisters.org); phone: 574-284-5303; fax: 574-284-5596).*

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