

World Scientists' Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice

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Twenty-five years ago, the Union of Concerned Scientists and more than 1700 independent scientists, including the majority of living Nobel laureates in the sciences, penned the 1992 “World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity” (see supplemental file S1). These concerned professionals called on humankind to curtail environmental destruction and cautioned that “a great change in our stewardship of the Earth and the life on it is required, if vast human misery is to be avoided.” In their manifesto, they showed that humans were on a collision course with the natural world. They expressed concern about current, impending, or potential damage on planet Earth involving ozone depletion, freshwater availability, marine life depletion, ocean dead zones, forest loss, biodiversity destruction, climate change, and continued human population growth. They proclaimed that fundamental changes were urgently needed to avoid the consequences our present course would bring.

The authors of the 1992 declaration feared that humanity was pushing Earth’s ecosystems beyond their capacities to support the web of life. They described how we are fast approaching many of the limits of what the biosphere can tolerate without substantial and irreversible harm. The scientists pleaded that we stabilize the human population, describing how our large numbers—swelled by another 2 billion people since 1992, a 35 percent increase—exert stresses on Earth that can overwhelm other efforts to realize a sustainable future (Crist et al. 2017). They implored that we cut greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and phase out fossil fuels, reduce

deforestation, and reverse the trend of collapsing biodiversity.

On the twenty-fifth anniversary of their call, we look back at their warning and evaluate the human response by exploring available time-series data. Since 1992, with the exception of stabilizing the stratospheric ozone layer, humanity has failed to make sufficient progress in generally solving these foreseen environmental challenges, and alarmingly, most of them are getting far worse (figure 1, file S1). Especially troubling is the current trajectory of potentially catastrophic climate change due to rising GHGs from burning fossil fuels (Hansen et al. 2013), deforestation (Keenan et al. 2015), and agricultural production—particularly from farming ruminants for meat consumption (Ripple et al. 2014). Moreover, we have unleashed a mass extinction event, the sixth in roughly 540 million years, wherein many current life forms could be annihilated or at least committed to extinction by the end of this century.

Humanity is now being given a second notice, as illustrated by these alarming trends (figure 1). We are jeopardizing our future by not reining in our intense but geographically and demographically uneven material consumption and by not perceiving continued rapid population growth as a primary driver behind many ecological and even societal threats (Crist et al. 2017). By failing to adequately limit population growth, reassess the role of an economy rooted in growth, reduce greenhouse gases, incentivize renewable energy, protect habitat, restore ecosystems, curb pollution, halt defaunation, and constrain invasive alien species, humanity is not taking

the urgent steps needed to safeguard our imperilled biosphere.

As most political leaders respond to pressure, scientists, media influencers, and lay citizens must insist that their governments take immediate action as a moral imperative to current and future generations of human and other life. With a groundswell of organized grassroots efforts, dogged opposition can be overcome and political leaders compelled to do the right thing. It is also time to re-examine and change our individual behaviors, including limiting our own reproduction (ideally to replacement level at most) and drastically diminishing our *per capita* consumption of fossil fuels, meat, and other resources.

The rapid global decline in ozone-depleting substances shows that we can make positive change when we act decisively. We have also made advancements in reducing extreme poverty and hunger (www.worldbank.org). Other notable progress (which does not yet show up in the global data sets in figure 1) include the rapid decline in fertility rates in many regions attributable to investments in girls’ and women’s education (www.un.org/esa/population), the promising decline in the rate of deforestation in some regions, and the rapid growth in the renewable-energy sector. We have learned much since 1992, but the advancement of urgently needed changes in environmental policy, human behavior, and global inequities is still far from sufficient.

Sustainability transitions come about in diverse ways, and all require civil-society pressure and evidence-based advocacy, political leadership, and a solid understanding of policy

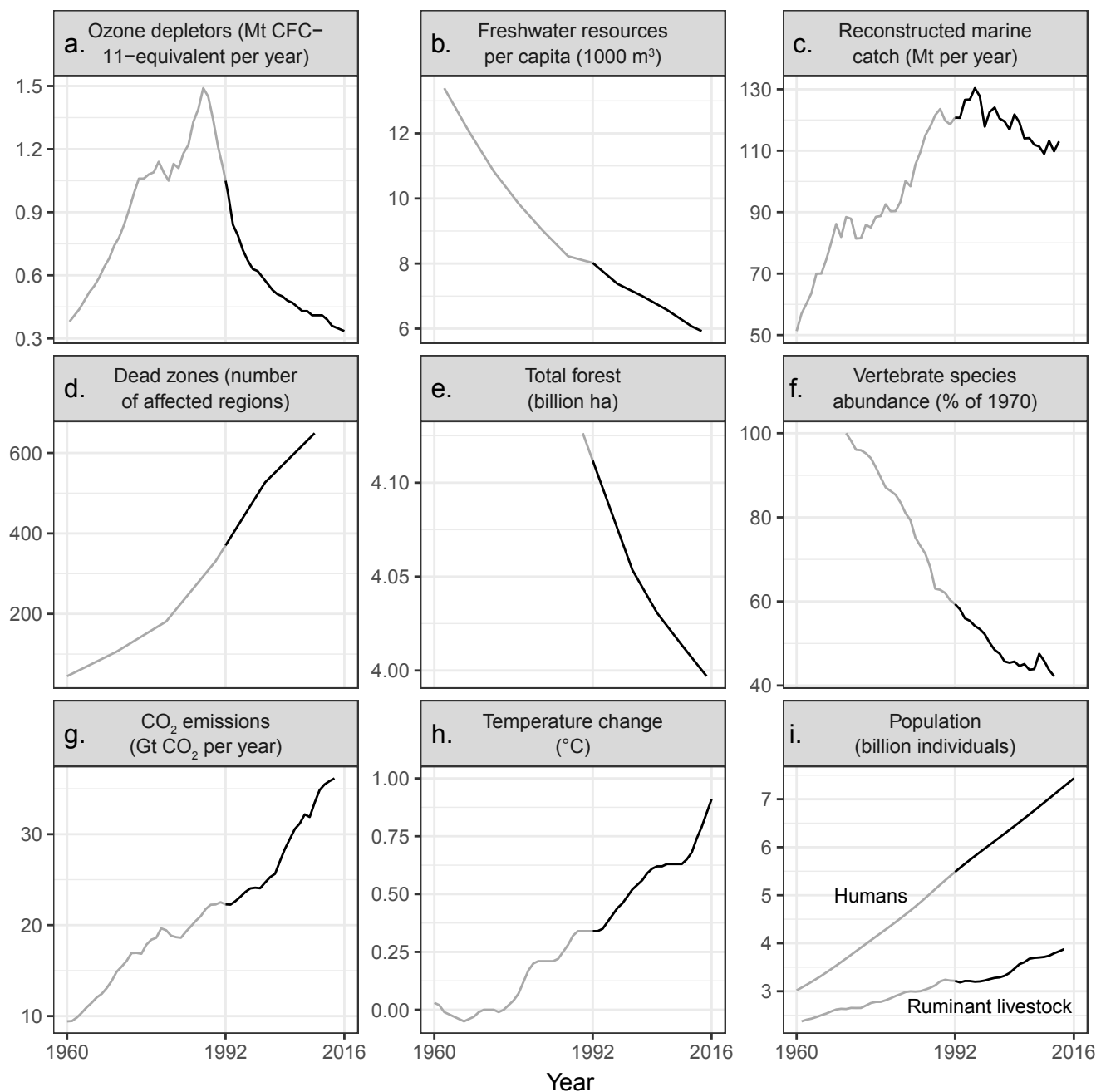


Figure 1. Trends over time for environmental issues identified in the 1992 scientists' warning to humanity. The years before and after the 1992 scientists' warning are shown as gray and black lines, respectively. Panel (a) shows emissions of halogen source gases, which deplete stratospheric ozone, assuming a constant natural emission rate of 0.11 Mt CFC-11-equivalent per year. In panel (c), marine catch has been going down since the mid-1990s, but at the same time, fishing effort has been going up (supplemental file S1). The vertebrate abundance index in panel (f) has been adjusted for taxonomic and geographic bias but incorporates relatively little data from developing countries, where there are the fewest studies; between 1970 and 2012, vertebrates declined by 58 percent, with freshwater, marine, and terrestrial populations declining by 81, 36, and 35 percent, respectively (file S1). Five-year means are shown in panel (h). In panel (i), ruminant livestock consist of domestic cattle, sheep, goats, and buffaloes. Note that y-axes do not start at zero, and it is important to inspect the data range when interpreting each graph. Percentage change, since 1992, for the variables in each panel are as follows: (a) -68.1%; (b) -26.1%; (c) -6.4%; (d) +75.3%; (e) -2.8%; (f) -28.9%; (g) +62.1%; (h) +167.6%; and (i) humans: +35.5%, ruminant livestock: +20.5%. Additional descriptions of the variables and trends, as well as sources for figure 1, are included in file S1.

instruments, markets, and other drivers. Examples of diverse and effective steps humanity can take to transition to sustainability include the following (not in order of importance or urgency): (a) prioritizing the enactment of connected well-funded and well-managed reserves for a significant proportion of the world's terrestrial, marine, freshwater, and aerial habitats; (b) maintaining nature's ecosystem services by halting the conversion of forests, grasslands, and other native habitats; (c) restoring native plant communities at large scales, particularly forest landscapes; (d) rewilding regions with native species, especially apex predators, to restore ecological processes and dynamics; (e) developing and adopting adequate policy instruments to remedy defaunation, the poaching crisis, and the exploitation and trade of threatened species; (f) reducing food waste through education and better infrastructure; (g) promoting dietary shifts towards mostly plant-based foods; (h) further reducing fertility rates by ensuring that women and men have access to education and voluntary family-planning services, especially where such resources are still lacking; (i) increasing outdoor nature education for children, as well as the overall engagement of society in the appreciation of nature; (j) divesting of monetary investments and purchases to encourage positive environmental change; (k) devising and promoting new green technologies and massively adopting renewable energy sources while phasing out subsidies to energy production through fossil fuels; (l) revising our economy to reduce wealth inequality and ensure that prices, taxation, and incentive systems take into account the real costs which consumption patterns impose on our environment; and (m) estimating a scientifically defensible, sustainable human population size for the long term while rallying nations and leaders to support that vital goal.

To prevent widespread misery and catastrophic biodiversity

loss, humanity must practice a more environmentally sustainable alternative to business as usual. This prescription was well articulated by the world's leading scientists 25 years ago, but in most respects, we have not heeded their warning. Soon it will be too late to shift course away from our failing trajectory, and time is running out. We must recognize, in our day-to-day lives and in our governing institutions, that Earth with all its life is our only home.

Epilogue

We have been overwhelmed with the support for our article and thank the more than 15,000 signatories from all ends of the Earth (see supplemental file S2 for list of signatories). As far as we know, this is the most scientists to ever co-sign and formally support a published journal article. In this paper, we have captured the environmental trends over the last 25 years, showed realistic concern, and suggested a few examples of possible remedies. Now, as an Alliance of World Scientists (scientists.forestry.oregonstate.edu) and with the public at large, it is important to continue this work to document challenges, as well as improved situations, and to develop clear, trackable, and practical solutions while communicating trends and needs to world leaders. Working together while respecting the diversity of people and opinions and the need for social justice around the world, we can make great progress for the sake of humanity and the planet on which we depend.

Spanish, Portuguese, and French versions of this article can be found in file S1.

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Supplemental material

Supplementary data are available at BIOSCI online including supplemental file 1 and supplemental file 2 (full list of all 15,364 signatories).

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