



# The global emergency—Perspectives, overviews, responses



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## ARTICLE INFO

Article history:  
Available online 16 July 2015

**Keywords:**  
Continuity and change  
Complexity  
Global limits  
Analysis of global situation  
Solutions  
Strategies of response

## ABSTRACT

The article reviews a number of recent works that cover different aspects of continuity and change in a complex world. The choice of these sources is governed by criteria that include quality, relevance and fit with the observer's interests. In this case the fact that humanity had started to overshoot global limits in the 1980s leads to shared concerns about the viability of the current world order. The chosen works respond to these concerns in two ways. The first group of four works attempts to analyse the present global situation and, in so doing, seek to offer conclusions and recommendations. The second group consisting of two works focus more specifically on possible solutions and strategies of response.

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## 1. Introduction

A major concern for those working in any futures related profession is how to keep up with the shifting currents of continuity and change. What sources do you consult and to whom do you turn for high quality understanding and insight? Since virtually everyone is swamped with, for example, emails, marketing messages and social media of various kinds, it can be genuinely difficult to 'cut through' the never-ending clamour of distraction. A partial solution is to scan as widely as possible for reviews, extracts and promotions of new non-fiction material while, at the same time, keeping an eye out for new and different items that randomly appear. Deciding what is relevant and useful is, of course, subjective. The key is to employ a clear set of criteria such as: quality, relevance and fit with the observer's main interests.

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I am interested in sources that help to clarify how patterns of continuity and change are playing out at the global level and, importantly, what this means for current policy, decision making and futures/foresight practice at every level. An earlier assessment of what those processes are telling us was summarised in *The Biggest Wake-Up Call in History* (Slaughter, 2010) and *To See With Fresh Eyes* (Slaughter, 2012). I accept the view that humanity began to exceed global limits during the mid-1980s and has been in 'overshoot' mode ever since (Bardi, 2011). Yet, broadly speaking, this fact is consistently omitted or denied within the worldviews of the rich and powerful. So I am interested in material that either supports or addresses the view that we are in the early stages of a global emergency. The more clarity that can be achieved here, in this specific arena, the better.

So the main purpose of this article is to consider works that have something useful to bring to this critical, but often-overlooked discussion. Clearly no one can read everything so the piece is predicated on the view that to summarise useful material in a relatively short and readable form is indeed helpful to the hard-pressed reader. All of the sources considered here have something useful or original to offer and draw upon a yet wider range of related material. So the spread of ideas is broad and all are deemed worthy of considered attention.

The paper is divided into two parts. The first looks at works by Weisman, Doherty, Greer and Urry. They each attempt what might be called a 'situation assessment' by outlining aspects of the global context and providing an account of their conclusions and recommendations. The second part contains works by Zolli and Higgins. These focus more specifically on possible solutions or strategies of response. This is, of course, not a hard and fast distinction as some works attempt both. Generally speaking, however, writers tend to emphasise one or the other. It is, of course, rather easier to describe what appears to be happening than it is to work out possible solutions. It is also a good way to begin this overview.

## 2. Assessing the global situation

### 2.1. Broad compendium of evidence

Alan Weisman's book *Countdown* carries the provocative sub-title *Our Last, Best Hope for a Future on Earth?* (Weisman, 2013). The very first page bears a photo that exemplifies its main theme—the world is under extreme human pressure. It shows a grossly laden truck making its unsteady way across a desert landscape. The truck is so overburdened with an assortment of human riders and their baggage that the wheels are barely visible. A hoard of people compressed thus within a setting apparently devoid of non-human life is a striking metaphor for our crowded and over-stressed world. But the book is no eco-tract. Its author has followed what has become a standard procedure for anyone wishing to write – and have published – a commercially viable work on global issues. Weisman has taken time out to travel, ask questions, listen and then report back in a very concrete, non-theoretical way. The book has over 500 pages and hence is not a quick read, but it is accessible and engaging throughout.

Part one begins with a chapter set in the 'weary lands' of the Middle East and four questions about population, limits, the relative health of ecosystems and sustainability. None are answered in ways that provide cause for optimism. In fact they lead on to a chapter entitled 'A world bursting at the seams' in which we find the following admission. 'If saving the planet depends on changing acquisitive human nature . . . the Earth will likely be thoroughly sacked long before that's ever accomplished' (p. 40–41). It acknowledges the scale of the problem, expresses scepticism about the efficacy of technical fixes and emphasises the notion of an optimum population.

Chapter three provides a concise account of how and why the human population grew so rapidly over the last few hundred years. It provides a useful summary of some of the discoveries and innovations that made it all possible. They include Pasteur's work and the later discovery of penicillin, measures for controlling mosquitoes, the invention of infant formula and of beef stock cubes. Other advances include the discovery of ways to create nitrogen fertiliser, initially from air and later from other chemical sources. Vaccines were invented that reduced the incidence of many diseases. Then in the 1970s Norman Borlaug and others were responsible for making possible significant increases the productivity of grain crops that came to be termed the 'Green Revolution.'

It is significant that Borlaug's Nobel Prize acceptance speech paid tribute to these and other measures to ensure human wellbeing. But he went on to say that 'there can be no permanent progress in the battle against hunger until the agencies that fight for increased food production and those that fight for population control unite in a common effort.' Weisman himself adds that Borlaug's view was that 'the Green Revolution . . . essentially bought the world another generation or so to resolve the population problem' (p. 58). Yet on the very next page we read that 'paradoxically, enhanced food production has resulted in a planet with more hungry people than every before.' This suggests yet again that our multiple failures to learn and to heed well-grounded warnings are central to the dilemmas we now face.

Chapter four considers global carrying capacity and human birth rates. The plight of Puerto Rico is outlined as are measures taken there, despite Catholic influence, to reduce the rate of population increase. It contrasts the widely quoted and misguided view expressed by George Bush senior that 'the American way of life is not negotiable' with Ehrlich and Holdren's (Ehrlich & Ehrlich, 2013) attempts to link some tentative numbers with the notion of a global carrying capacity. To cut that story short, they came up with a figure between  $1^{1/2}$  and 2 billion people, along with the now-famous IPAT formula (Impact = Population  $\times$  Affluence  $\times$  Technology). While still not universally accepted this simple formula actually nailed down the fact that population *per se* was by not an isolated issue. What also must be accounted for are the lifestyle conditions

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