Chapter 19: Technological Advances and Economics in the Global Age: 19-3c Conserving and Sharing Resources
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19-3c Conserving and Sharing Resources

In the 1960s environmental activists and political leaders began warning about the devastating environmental consequences of population growth, industrialization, natural resource exploitation, and the expansion of agriculture onto marginal lands and forests. Assaults on rain forests, the disappearance of species, and the poisoning of streams and rivers raised public consciousness, as did the depletion and pollution of the world's oceans. Environmental damage occurred both in the advanced industrial economies and in developing nations. The former Soviet Union, where industrial and nuclear wastes were routinely dumped with little concern for environmental consequences, had the worst environmental record.

In the developed world, industrial activity increased much more rapidly than the population grew, and the consumption of energy (coal, electricity, and petroleum) rose proportionally. This pattern is now clear in India, China, and other industrializing nations as well. Indeed, the consumer-driven economic expansion of the post–World War II years became an obstacle to addressing environmental problems, since modern economies depend on a profligate consumption of goods and resources (see Map 19.1). When consumption slows, industrial nations enter a recession, as recently demonstrated in 2008. How could the United States, Germany, Japan, or China change consumption patterns to protect the environment without endangering corporate profits, wages, and employment levels?

Map 19.1

Fresh Water Resources

This map links population density and the availability of water. Red areas are highly stressed environments where populations use at least 40 percent or more of available water. Less stressed environments are blue. The deeper the shade of red or blue, the greater the environmental stress. The ongoing effects of global warming on this crucial resource is unknown, but our ability to sustain intense modern agriculture in low-rainfall, high-average temperature environments will certainly be challenged.

Source: From "Global Water Stress," National Geographic, September 2002, pp. 14–16. Reprinted by permission of the National Geographic Society.

Which regions are both "highly stressed" and poor?

Since 1945 population growth has been most dramatic in the developing countries, where environmental pressures have also been extreme. In Brazil, India, and China, for example, the need to expand food production led to rapid deforestation and the extension of farming and grazing onto marginal lands. The results were predictable: erosion and water pollution. These and many other poor nations sought to stimulate industrialization because they believed that the transition from agriculture to manufacturing was the only way to provide for their rapidly growing populations. The argument was compelling: Why should Indians or Brazilians remain poor while Americans, Europeans, and Japanese grew rich?