

HUMAN IMPACTS by the numbers

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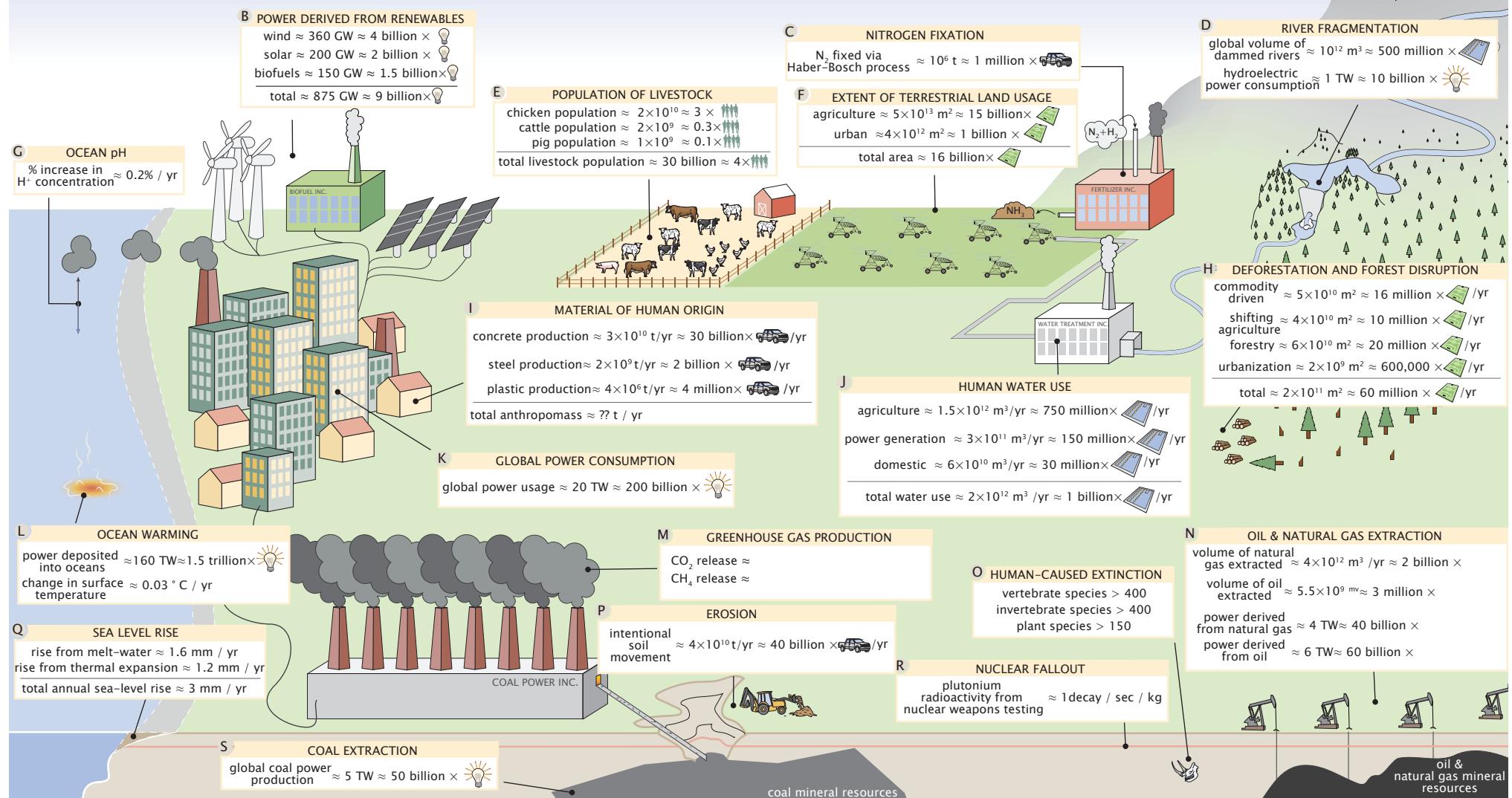
Department of Plant and Environmental Sciences

ABSTRACT

The greatest experiment of the last 10,000 years is the presence and action of modern human beings on planet Earth. At this point, the consequences of this experiment are being felt on many fronts. Yet, many people still hold the view that because the world is so "huge", humans cannot really make a substantial impact. One way to organize our thinking about what these impacts might be, with tongue in cheek, is to focus on Empedocles's classic elements, earth, air, water and fire, with the idea being to explore how humans have altered the land and its inhabitants, the atmosphere, the oceans and how our quest for cheaper and cheaper energy (fire) from the world around us has altered that world. This snapshot represents a small collection of numbers that summarize the broad reach of human action across the planet, presenting a view of the impact of human presence on Earth.

UNITS OF REFERENCE

human population	= ≈ 7×10^9	mass of a pick-up truck	= ≈ 1 t
area of soccer pitch	= ≈ 3000 m ²	power of a lightbulb	= ≈ 100 W
volume of olympic pool	= ≈ 2000 m ³		



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THE ANTHROPOCENE

A visit to any natural history museum will reveal that much about Earth's history can be learned by examining the geological and fossil record. As humans have made extensive changes to the Earth's chemistry and biology, in addition to the physical changes to the Earth's crust, the record of our existence will similarly be preserved in the geological record. The **Anthropomass Number** reveals that, as of 2020, the total mass of human-derived material (concrete, plastic, steel, etc.) is now approximately equal to the mass of the entire biosphere. The **Terra Number** illustrates that humans occupy or directly control $\approx 30\%$ of the terrestrial surface area, meaning artifacts of human society is widespread across the planet. The **Radionuclide Number** describes a radioactive signature of nuclear weapons testing in a 20,000 fold enrichment in plutonium isotope radioactivity that will be detectable in stratified soil several hundred thousand years into the future. Finally, the **Extinction Number** shows that the current extinction rate is at least several hundred times above the background extinction rate for plant and animal species, dictating the future fossil record. While incomplete, these dimensionless numbers represent the magnitude to which human activity will be evident in Earth's geological record beyond the existence of our species as we currently know it.

THE MAGNITUDE OF HUMAN WATER USAGE

Humans use more water than any other substance on the planet. Our requirement for water, both for personal use and for industrial purposes, coupled with changes in our atmospheric chemistry have substantially altered the hydrosphere from many angles. The **Niagara Number** captures the magnitude of human water usage, revealing that on a daily basis, humans use approximately and order of magnitude more water than falls over Niagara falls in a single day. This use is dominated by power-plant usage (for cooling) and agriculture. The flow of water from high to low elevations can be used to generate hydroelectricity via river damming. The **Hoover Number** reveals that there is an approximately equal volume global river water used by hydroelectric dams as there are free-flowing rivers on Earth, which has strong implications on stability of watersheds and river ecosystems. Anthropogenic emission of CO₂ has lead to widespread warming of the climate, resulting in melting of glaciers and ice-caps. The **Ice-Melt Number** summarizes the extent as this melting as releasing ≈ 1 Grand Canyon's worth of water into the hydrosphere per year. Approximately 40% of CO₂ emissions are absorbed by Earth's oceans and seas, ultimately shifting the equilibrium of carbonic acid. The **Acidic Ocean Number** captures the extent of this effect, revealing a $\approx 30\%$ increase in hydrogen ion concentration in the oceans over the 60 year period of 1960 – present.

HUMANS AS THE EARTH'S GREATEST EVOLUTIONARY FORCE

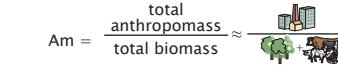
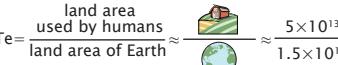
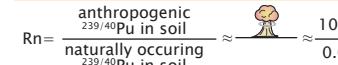
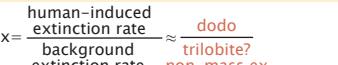
Biology's greatest idea is evolution, the fact that over time, the living world has always and will continue to always change. Species come and species go. Natural forces, such as the closing of the Isthmus of Panama, result in profound changes to the living world. As humans have increased in population and technological prowess, so too has their impact on the evolutionary process. The **Barnyard Number** captures the magnitude of animal husbandry by humans by measuring the relative population sizes of the entirety of our domesticated animals relative to the size of the human population itself. Natural habitats across the globe have been altered significantly by human action. The **Deforestation Number** compares the loss of forest resulting from human activity to that which occurs naturally.

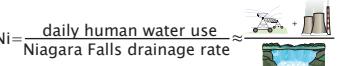
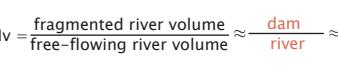
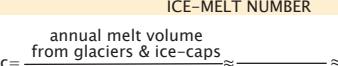
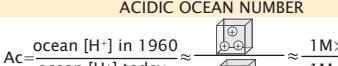
HUMAN IMPACTS ON ATMOSPHERIC AND BIOGEOCHEMICAL CYCLES

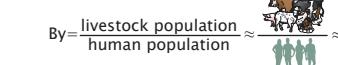
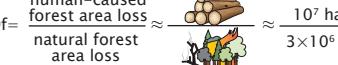
The Keeling curve has the same iconic status as the DNA double helix. Beginning in the 1950s, we have had a largely uninterrupted quantitative glimpse into the atmospheric concentration of CO₂. To get an impression of the human-induced increase in atmospheric CO₂, the **Keeling Number** compares the total anthropogenic CO₂ released in comparison with the CO₂ released from the eruption of Mt. St. Helens, revealing humans have released 200,000 times the amount of CO₂ as this infamous eruption. Perhaps even more dramatic than our impact on the CO₂ budget of the atmosphere is our role in nitrogen fixation. The **Haber-Bosch Number** measures the ratio of atmospheric nitrogen fixed through the Haber-Bosch process to that occurring naturally in the rhizosphere due to microbes. The **Volta Number** characterizes a less well-known example, namely, the volume of anthropogenic methane in comparison with the methane of XXXX. The Erosion number compares the volume of soil moved by humans to that moved by rivers.

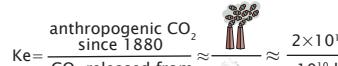
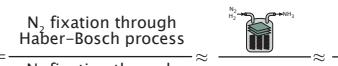
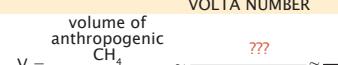
THE MAGNITUDE OF HUMAN ENERGY USAGE

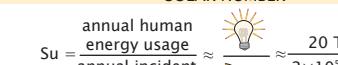
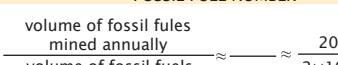
Finding new ways to extract useful work from the world is one of the signature achievements of the human condition. And yet, this act of learning how to extract energy from the environment is a large part of the story of human impacts, whether in the burning of various fuels that change the atmosphere, or the damming of the world's rivers to produce electricity. The **Solar Number** is one of the most important human impacts numbers of all and compares the 20 TW per year energy use of humans to the 10,000 fold higher incident power from the sun. The **Fossil Fuel Number**

ANTHROPOMASS NUMBER		TERRA NUMBER	
Am = 	$\frac{\text{total anthropomass}}{\text{total biomass}} \approx \frac{550 \text{ Gt C}}{1 \text{ Gt C}} \approx 1$	Te = 	$\frac{\text{land area used by humans}}{\text{land area of Earth}} \approx \frac{5 \times 10^{13} \text{ m}^2}{1.5 \times 10^{14} \text{ m}^2} \approx 0.3$
RADIONUCLIDE NUMBER		EXTINCTION NUMBER	
Rn = 	$\frac{\text{anthropogenic } ^{239/40}\text{Pu in soil}}{\text{naturally occurring } ^{239/40}\text{Pu in soil}} \approx \frac{1000 \text{ mBq / kg}}{0.05 \text{ mBq / kg}} \approx 2 \times 10^4$	Ex = 	$\frac{\text{human-induced extinction rate}}{\text{background extinction rate}} \approx \frac{\text{dodo}}{\text{trilobite? non-mass ex}}$

NIAGARA NUMBER		HOOVER NUMBER	
Ni = 	$\frac{\text{daily human water use}}{\text{Niagara Falls drainage rate}} \approx \frac{10^{10} \text{ m}^3/\text{day}}{10^9 \text{ m}^3/\text{day}} \approx 10$	Hv = 	$\frac{\text{fragmented river volume}}{\text{free-flowing river volume}} \approx \frac{\text{dam}}{\text{river}} \approx \frac{10^{12} \text{ m}^3}{10^{12} \text{ m}^3} \approx 1$
ICE-MELT NUMBER		ACIDIC OCEAN NUMBER	
Ic = 	$\frac{\text{annual melt volume from glaciers \& ice-caps}}{\text{volume of Grand Canyon}} \approx \frac{10^{12} \text{ m}^3/\text{yr}}{10^{12} \text{ m}^3} \approx 1/\text{yr}$	Ac = 	$\frac{\text{ocean [H}^+ \text{] in 1960}}{\text{ocean [H}^+ \text{] today}} \approx \frac{1 \text{ M} \times 10^{-8.2}}{1 \text{ M} \times 10^{-8.1}} \approx 0.7$

BARNYARD NUMBER		DEFORESTATION NUMBER	
By = 	$\frac{\text{livestock population}}{\text{human population}} \approx \frac{30 \times 10^9}{7 \times 10^9} \approx 4$	Df = 	$\frac{\text{human-caused forest area loss}}{\text{natural forest area loss}} \approx \frac{10^7 \text{ ha/year}}{3 \times 10^6 \text{ ha/year}} \approx 3$
NUMBER RELEVANT TO ECOLOGY		NUMBER RELEVANT TO MARINE LIFE	

KEELING NUMBER		HABER-BOSCH NUMBER	
Ke = 	$\frac{\text{anthropogenic CO}_2 \text{ since 1880}}{\text{CO}_2 \text{ released from Mt. St. Helens}} \approx \frac{2 \times 10^{15} \text{ kg CO}_2}{10^{10} \text{ kg CO}_2} \approx 2 \times 10^5$	Ha = 	$\frac{\text{N}_2 \text{ fixation through Haber-Bosch process}}{\text{N}_2 \text{ fixation through biological processes}} \approx \frac{\text{Hab}}{\text{Bio}} \approx \frac{200 \text{ Tg N}}{200 \text{ Tg N}} \approx 1$
VOLTA NUMBER		EROSION NUMBER	
V = 	$\frac{\text{volume of anthropogenic CH}_4}{\text{volume of biological CH}_4} \approx \frac{??}{??} \approx 1$	Er = 	$\frac{\text{soil moved by humans}}{\text{soil moved by rivers}} \approx \frac{40 \text{ Gt / yr}}{5 \text{ Gt / yr}} \approx 8$

SOLAR NUMBER		FOSSIL FUEL NUMBER	
Su = 	$\frac{\text{annual human energy usage}}{\text{annual incident solar energy}} \approx \frac{20 \text{ TW}}{2 \times 10^5 \text{ TW}} \approx 0.0001$	Fo = 	$\frac{\text{volume of fossil fuels mined annually}}{\text{volume of fossil fuels in proven resources}} \approx \frac{20 \text{ TW}}{2 \times 10^5 \text{ TW}} \approx 0.0001$
NUMBER RELEVANT TO OTHER MINING		NUMBER RELEVANT TO RENEWABLE USE	

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

A MELTWATER

glacial melt rate	HuD: 32459
ice-sheet melt rate	HuD: 44746; 88530
total melt rate	HuD: 000000

Data Source(s):

Notes:

B POWER DERIVED FROM RENEWABLES

wind	HuD: 30581
solar	HuD: 99885
biofuels	HuD: 89570
total	HuD: 20246

Data Source(s): bp Statistical Review of World Energy, 2020.

Notes: Reported values correspond to estimates for the 2019 calendar year. Renewable resources are defined as wind, geothermal, solar, biomass and waste, and does not include hydroelectric power generation.

C NITROGEN FIXATION

N_2 flux through Haber-Bosch [HuD: 000000](#)

Data Source(s):

Notes:

D RIVER FRAGMENTATION

dammed river volume [HuD: 000000](#)

Data Source(s):

Notes:

hydroelectric power [HuD: 27945](#)

Data Source(s): bp Statistical Review of World Energy, 2020.

Notes: Value corresponds to the reported value of global hydroelectricity consumption for 2019.

E LIVESTOCK POPULATION

chicken	HuD: 94934
cattle	HuD: 92006
swine	HuD: 21368
total	HuD: 15765

Data Source(s): Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Statistical Database (FAOSTAT).

Notes: Counts correspond to the approximate average of the standing populations reported between 2010 – 2018. Values are reported directly by countries, yet the FAO uses non-governmental statistical sources to address uncertainty and missing (non-reported) data.

F EXTENT OF TERRESTRIAL LAND USAGE

agriculture [HuD: 29582](#)

Data Source(s): Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Statistical Database (FAOSTAT).

Notes: "Agriculture" land is defined as all land that is under agricultural management including pastures, meadows, permanent crops, temporary crops, land under fallow, and land under agricultural structures. Reported value corresponds to 2017 measurements by FAO.

urban [HuD: 00000](#)

Data Source(s): World Bank and Center for International Earth Science Information Network (CIESIN)/Columbia University. 2013

Notes: Urban land area is determined from satellite imagery. An area is determined to be "urban" if the total population is greater than 5,000. Rural land is defined as Urban and value corresponds to the most recent estimate from 2010.

total [HuD: 15765](#)

Data Source(s): Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations Statistical Database (FAOSTAT)

Notes: "Agriculture" land is defined as all land that is under agricultural management including pastures, meadows, permanent crops, temporary crops, land under fallow, and land under agricultural structures.

G OCEAN pH

yearly change in $[H^+]$ [HuD: 19394](#)

Data Source(s): Figure 2 of European Environment Agency report CLIM 043 (2020). Original data source of report is "Global Mean Sea Water pH" from Copernicus Marine Environment Monitoring Service.

Notes: Reported value is calculated from the average annual change in pH over years 1985–2018. Annual change in pH is ≈ 0.001 pH units, corresponding to a change in $[H^+]$ of $\approx 0.2\% / yr$.

N OIL & NATURAL GAS EXTRACTION

power derived from nat. gas [HuD: 49947](#)

power derived from oil [HuD: 42121](#)

volume of nat. gas extraction [HuD: 11468](#)

volume of oil extraction [HuD: 66789](#)

Data Source(s): bp Statistical Review of World Energy, 2020.

Notes: Values pertain to 2019 estimates only. Oil volume includes crude oil, shale oil, oil sands, condensates, and natural gas liquids separate from specific natural gas mining. Natural gas value excludes gas flared or recycled and includes natural gas produced for gas-to-liquids transformation.

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H DEFORESTATION AND DISRUPTION

commodity-driven [HuD: 96098](#)

shifting agriculture [HuD: 24388](#)

forestry [HuD: 38352](#)

urbanization [HuD: 19429](#)

total [HuD: 78576](#)

Data Source(s): Table 1 and Figure 3 of Curtis et al. 2018 DOI:10.1126/science.aau3445.

Notes: Counts correspond to the approximate average of the standing populations reported between 2010 – 2018. Values are reported directly by countries, yet the FAO uses non-governmental statistical sources to address uncertainty and missing (non-reported) data.

Data Source(s): commodity-driven deforestation is defined as "long-term, permanent, conversion of forest and shrubland to nonforest land use such as agriculture, mining, or energy infrastructure." Forest area loss due to shifting agriculture is defined as "smal-to-medium-scale forest and shrubland conversion for agriculture that is later abandoned and followed by subsequent forest regrowth." Forest area disruption due to forestry is defined as "large-scale forestry operations occurring within managed forests and tree plantations with evidence of forest regrowth in subsequent years." Forest land disruption due to urbanization is defined as "forest and shrubland conversion for the expansion and intensification of existing urban centers."

Total value of deforested and disrupted forest land includes wildfires of both human and natural causes. Values correspond to calendar year 2015 and are calculated from the statistic that $\approx 25\%$ of total deforested and disrupted forest land sums to $\approx 5\text{ Mha/yr}$. See Table 1 and Figure 3 of Curtis et al. 2018 for further discussion.

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