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## No. 205, 2005

**McNicoll, Geoffrey.** "Population and sustainability," *Policy Research Division Working Paper* no. 205. New York: Population Council. ([PDF](#))

### Abstract

Sustainability refers to the preservation of human-valued natural capital—the resources that provide environmental services—at a level sufficient to assure the well-being of future generations. Population change bears on sustainability through effects on the total and per capita availability of those services. Possibilities of resource exhaustion are often exaggerated, but so too are the levels of substitutability between natural and other forms of capital. The degradation of environmental services—exemplified by the overuse of aquifers or (at a global level) of the atmospheric carbon sink—is a significant threat to sustainable development, one that is often exacerbated by population growth. The critical management issue in such cases is the design of effective governing institutions to restrain service demand and safeguard supply. Uncertainties arising from nonlinearities and irreversibilities in environmental systems should give pause to expectations that the forecast ending of world population growth, and a subsequent decline in human numbers, will usher in ecological restoration.



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