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U.N. Warns of Rapid Decay of Environment

By JAMES KANTER

PARIS, Oct. 25 — The human population is living far beyond its means and inflicting damage to the environment that could pass points of no return, according to a major report issued Thursday by the [United Nations](#).

[Climate change](#), the rate of extinction of species, and the challenge of feeding a growing population are putting humanity at risk, the United Nations Environment Program said in its fourth Global Environmental Outlook since 1997.

“The human population is now so large that the amount of resources needed to sustain it exceeds what is available at current consumption patterns,” Achim Steiner, the executive director of the Environment Program, said in a telephone interview.

Many biologists and climate scientists have concluded that human activities have become a dominant influence on the Earth’s climate and ecosystems. But there is still a range of views on whether the changes could have catastrophic impacts, as the human population heads toward nine billion by midcentury, or more manageable results.

Over the last two decades, the world population increased by almost 34 percent, to 6.7 billion, from 5 billion. But the land available to each person is shrinking, from 19.5 acres in 1900 to 5 acres by 2005, the report said.

Population growth combined with unsustainable consumption has resulted in an increasingly stressed planet where natural disasters and environmental degradation endanger people, plants and animal species.

Persistent problems include a rapid rise of “dead zones,” where marine life no longer can be supported because pollutants like runoff fertilizers deplete oxygen.

But Mr. Steiner, of the Environment Program, did note that Western European governments had taken effective measures to reduce air pollutants and that Brazil had made efforts to roll back some deforestation. He said an international treaty to tackle the hole in the earth’s ozone layer had led to the phasing out of 95 percent of ozone-damaging chemicals.

“Life would be easier if we didn’t have the kind of population growth rates that we have at the moment,” Mr. Steiner said. “But to force people to stop having children would be a simplistic answer. The more realistic, ethical and practical issue is to accelerate human well-being and make more rational use of the resources we have on this planet.”

Mr. Steiner said parts of Africa could reach an environmental tipping point if changing rainfall patterns turned

semi-arid zones into arid zones and made agriculture much harder. He said another tipping point could occur in India and China if Himalayan glaciers shrank so much that they no longer supplied adequate amounts of water.

He also warned of a global collapse of all species being fished by 2050, if fishing around the world continued at its current pace. The report said that two and a half times more fish were being caught than the oceans could produce in a sustainable manner, and that the level of fish stocks classed as collapsed had roughly doubled over the past 20 years, to 30 percent.

In the spirit of the United Nations report, President [Nicolas Sarkozy](#) of France outlined plans on Thursday to fight climate change.

He said he would make 1 billion euros, or \$1.4 billion, available over four years to develop energy sources and maintain biodiversity. He said each euro spent on nuclear research would be matched by one spent on research into clean technologies and environmental protection.

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