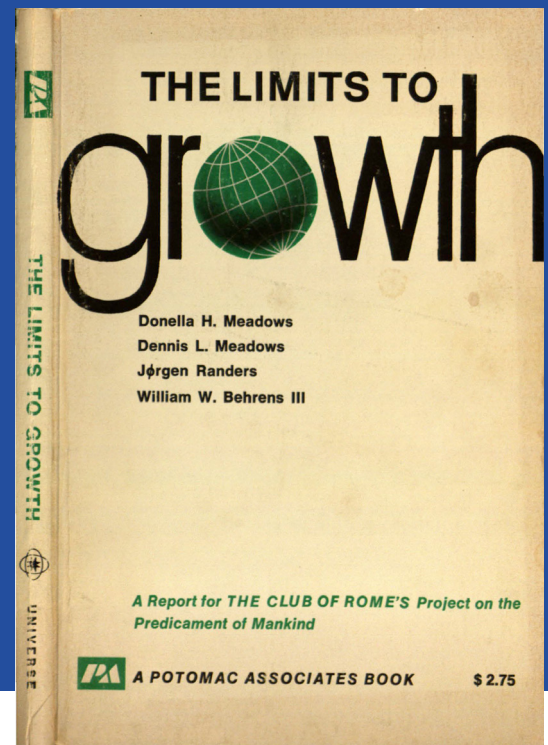




Understanding “The Limits to Growth”: A clear warning and a message of hope



“The Limits to growth” – a book published in 1972 as the product of a study on the future of our planet commissioned by the Club of Rome, has been described by some as [“likely to be one of the most important documents of our age”](#). While millions of copies have been sold in 30 languages over the past 50 years, the book’s results have often been misunderstood or misinterpreted. One imprecise summary that is often offered by the publication’s critics, is that the book was a “prediction” of collapse and a doomsday scenario. This was most certainly not the authors’ message. Below is a short summary of the main conclusions and messages of “The Limits to Growth”.

- At the time of publication, “The Limits to Growth” was the first study that looked at the interconnected challenges of the world using one of the first computer models to analyse 12 possible future scenarios of key interactions between global variables for population, technological development, industrial output, food, non-renewable resources, and pollution, spanning the period 1972 to 2100.
- In other words, using today’s language, the authors explored the possible impacts of the growing ecological footprint of population growth, human activities and its physical impacts on our finite planet from a systems perspective, as none of these issues can be addressed in isolation.
- It is important to note that not all scenarios presented in “The Limits to Growth” displayed collapse and decline. The authors in fact identified a set of assumptions that produced a “stabilised world” scenario – called the “sustainability scenario” in which collapse was avoided and standards of living remained high. The authors, however, did not forecast which scenario was the most likely or make any predictions in this regard.
- **“The Limits to Growth” contains six main messages:**
 - Firstly, that the environmental impact of human society had become heavier between 1900 and 1972 due to both an increase in the number of humans and the amount of resources consumed and pollution generated per person per year.
 - That our planet is physically limited, and that humanity cannot continue to use more physical resources and generate more emissions than nature is capable of supplying in a sustainable manner. In addition, it will not be possible to rely on technology alone to solve the problem as this would only delay reaching the carrying capacity of the planet by a few years.
 - Third, the authors cautioned that it is possible, and even likely, that the human ecological footprint will overshoot the carrying capacity of the planet, further explaining that this would likely occur due to significant delays in global decision making while growth continued, bringing the human footprint into unsustainable territory.

- Once humanity has entered this unsustainable territory, we will have to move back into sustainable territory, either through “managed decline” of activity, or we will be forced to move back through “collapse” caused by the brutal inherent processes of nature or the market.
- The fifth message is one of hope. The authors state that: “The challenge of overshoot from decision delay is real, but easily solvable if human society decided to act”, meaning that forward looking policy could prevent humanity from overshooting the aforementioned planetary limits.
- Lastly, the authors advocated for an early start – in 1972 that was 1975 – to achieve a smooth transition to a sustainable world without needing to pass through the overshoot and contraction phases.
- These messages have significantly contributed to the emergence of the environmental movement and alerted people and decision makers worldwide to the dangers of climate change, environmental pollution as well as unlimited resource consumption.
- Interestingly over the past half century, the world has progressed remarkably close to the “business-as-usual” scenario presented in “The Limits to Growth” (see [Turner, 2014](#); [Herrington, 2021](#)). The world population and

economy has continued to grow at roughly the same rate as in the decades before 1970, and as a result we now face a situation where we have already moved beyond the Earth’s carrying capacity. According to some experts, we actually already reached this point in the 1980s, which means that humanity now faces an unprecedented planetary emergency that threatens our very survival on this planet.

- Since commissioning this seminal study 50 years ago, the Club of Rome has published more than 40 reports intended to help better understand major global issues and seek to foster a greater sense of civic responsibility. The organisation continues to identify holistic solutions to complex global issues and promote policy initiatives and action to enable humanity to emerge from multiple planetary emergencies through the work done under its five thematic hubs: [Emerging New Civilisations](#), [Planetary Emergency](#), [Reframing Economics](#), [Rethinking Finance](#), [Youth Leadership and Intergenerational dialogues](#).
- Only collective action that reflects the interconnectedness and interdependence of the web of life, a holistic viewpoint and systems approach, will adequately address the issues we face as part of the planetary emergency. Both transformative thinking and action is needed.

