

Sustainability

What does sustainability look like?

An activity that is sustainable is one that is capable of continuing indefinitely. The conflict between this and the fact that the world is finite is often overlooked, leading to the term 'sustainable' being widely abused. Growth, for example, can never be truly sustainable so 'sustainable growth' is a contradiction in terms.

People rely on a number of resources and a healthy environment if they are to prosper. Since the first appearance of mankind, we have sometimes used resources unsustainably, but in the distant past, due to the then relatively low levels of our population, the impact was usually only local, or at worst regional. Since the industrial revolution, on the other hand, human activity and impact on the environment have grown relentlessly. We are now using many resources on an industrially intensive scale and much faster than they can be replenished, thereby causing irreparable damage to the environment.

In the natural world, species that live unsustainably, exceeding the carrying capacity of their environment by exhausting resources and degrading the environment, eventually experience a rapid and often catastrophic crash in numbers. If we don't take measures to prevent it, sooner or later this will happen to us, but it doesn't need to be that way.

Excessive levels of personal consumption and inefficient or polluting technology are obviously unsustainable. But even the best technology and the most modest life styles will still have some effect on the environment. This means that, if the population keeps on growing, human activity will inevitably become unsustainable. To assure a good or even acceptable quality of life in the future, it is essential

The resources we use and our impact on the environment effectively depend on three main factors:

- *Population* – how many of us there are consuming and creating waste
- *Affluence, or consumption* – the amount of goods and services on average we each use
- *Technology* – how inefficiently/harmfully we produce these goods and services

The Impact is the combination of all three factors and it can be summarised by what is known as the Ehrlich or IPAT equation.

Read more about [sustainability and the Ehrlich equation](#).

that we humans ensure that all three factors (Affluence, Technology and Population) are attended to.

On the other hand, so long as no one of the above three factors is too far out of line, there are many different sustainable solutions. Let's suppose that the very best environmentally friendly technology available is put into practice (this is not a foregone conclusion). Sustainable scenarios range from the maximum possible number of people all living at subsistence levels to a much smaller population all living very luxuriously. Provided the total environmental impact and consumption of resources is not excessive, any of these scenarios would be sustainable.

Sustainability, contd.

We have the choice:

- either to live on a very crowded planet with people at minimum (subsistence) standards of life.
- or to choose smaller populations and enough resources for everyone to aspire to a good quality of life – and more space for our other fellow species.

If we take the time to think about it, most of us would probably opt to be somewhere between the two extremes.

Read how [Biocapacity and Environmental Footprinting](#) help us to understand whether we are sustainable.