If you think about the history of the Earth, our time on it as humans is tiny. In fact, if geologic history was a calendar and the Earth formed on January 1 (that was 4.6 billion years ago), you wouldn’t find humans until December 31 at 11:37 pm (about 200,000 years ago). Back then, there weren’t very many of us, and we had yet to make our mark on the planet.

Fast forward to 12,000 years ago. Humans evolve from just hunting and gathering food to staying in one place and farming the land. Before long, we’re clearing forests, building cities and expanding human settlements across the globe.

Some trace the human dominance of Earth to those days of early farming. Others think it started much more recently – about 200 years ago with the Industrial Revolution. That’s when our world began to be mechanized; when we started using fossil fuels to power engines in our factories, on our farms, rivers and rails. Before long, our species had completely remade the Earth’s landscape. By the 1900s, we had vast amounts of land cleared for industrial-size farms, sprawling cities and mining operations. Scientists are now referring to this period since the Industrial Revolution as the Anthropocene, or Human Age. The word comes from the Greek anthropos (human) and -cene (recent) and is meant to show the overwhelming influence humans have had on the environment in such a short amount of time.

OUR LARGE AGRICULTURE FOOTPRINT

Sometimes, people refer to the “human footprint” to describe how our species has made its mark on the planet. One of the most visible signs of this is how we have altered the land. Satellite images of the Earth now show that nearly half of our land is used for agriculture – growing crops and grazing livestock. In 1700, just 7 percent of the world’s land was used for farming. Today, it is over 40 percent and growing. Experts say that, at this point, all of the best lands for farming and grazing have already been cultivated. The remaining areas are not ideally suited for agriculture and using them for farming would mean clearing valuable natural ecosystems, like forests.

This presents a dilemma, because world population is growing. It is estimated that the world will need to produce 70 percent more food for the expected population we will have by 2050 – 2-3 billion more people than are alive today. In order to maintain precious ecosystems, we will need to find ways to produce more food without expanding agricultural lands.
How land is used to produce food also depends on our choices about what we eat. Eating more meat and dairy, for example, has a greater impact on the environment than eating mostly vegetables, fruits and grains. Cattle require large amounts of land to generate relatively small amounts of food. Worldwide, cattle pastures make up 70 percent of global agricultural land, yet provide less than 10 percent of humanity’s food. A third of all croplands produce feed for livestock, rather than for humans.

**FOREST LOSS**

Some of the world’s land cleared for crops and livestock was once forest. We depend upon the world’s forests to regulate climate, to clean air and water, to conserve precious soil, and to provide habitat to much of the planet’s wildlife. Forests cover 30 percent of the Earth’s surface and are home to 80 percent of the world’s land-based plants and animals.

Since the Industrial Revolution, nearly half of Earth’s forests have been cleared or degraded to make way for agriculture and other human uses. Of greatest global concern is the loss of the Earth’s tropical rainforests and all of its biodiversity. Although tropical forests cover less than 7 percent of the global land surface, they are home to more than half the species of all living things. Rainforests are a treasure trove of foods, medicines, and other resources we have only begun to discover. Less than one percent of rainforest species have even been studied for their potential usefulness. Many species are so specialized to microhabitats within the forest that they can only be found in small areas. This specialization makes them vulnerable to extinction. Many countries have committed to finding ways to manage their forests sustainably, so as not to lose further habitat and all of the ecosystem services that forests provide.

**AN URBAN PLANET**

Wildlife habitat is also lost when land is cleared for development, including the expanding urban areas around the globe. As our population grows, we need more land for building houses, businesses, power plants, roads, schools, and for disposing of waste. Our planet is becoming increasingly urban. In 1800, only 3 percent of the world’s population lived in urban areas; today it’s more than half. By 2050, two-thirds of the world’s people will make their homes in cities.

The expansion of human settlements can pose challenges to the natural environment beyond just a change in the landscape. Communities require infrastructure – roads and bridges, public transportation and public utilities – to provide us with water, sewage treatment, power lines and cell phone towers. All of these expand our human impact and take up more space.
EXTRACTING RESOURCES

Another human impact on the world’s land results from resource extraction. The raw materials that provide us with all of the goods and services we need and want come from somewhere. The Earth is a finite system, after all. Look around you. Every item you can see has either been grown in the soil or extracted from deep underground.

The fossil fuels that power our lives – coal, oil and natural gas – are brought to you by mining and drilling operations. Coal is mined from the ground. Oil is pumped from rigs found on land and in the ocean. Natural gas is either extracted from conventional drilling operations, or from hydraulic fracturing (also known as fracking). Fracking has been controversial because it requires huge quantities of water, which become toxic and can leak into underground water sources. When this wastewater is disposed of, it creates pressure in the ground that can cause small earthquakes.

The minerals that comprise everyday objects – copper, aluminum, tin, quartz, clay and so much more – are extracted, either by surface mining or underground mining. Surface mining involves overturning or "stripping" the land to get to the minerals or using explosive to blow the tops off mountains. Underground mining uses shafts and tunnels to get at minerals deep below the Earth's surface. The effect on the land from mining operations can be permanent. This might include removing topsoil, destroying animal and plant habitat and polluting nearby water sources (such as rivers, lakes and streams) with chemicals and silt.

As humans, both our numbers and lifestyles affect the Earth’s land. Our demand for increasing amounts of food, energy and minerals, as well as our capacity to expand the built environment, has changed our land for all species. Providing for the needs of people while still protecting our remaining wildlife habitat will require a global commitment to land conservation.

Glossary

Anthropocene: A term referring to our current period since the Industrial Revolution where humans have had an overwhelming influence on the environment.
biodiversity: the variety of life in the world or in a particular habitat or ecosystem.
hydraulic fracturing (fracking): A procedure for extracting natural gas from deep in the ground, using a high-pressure stream of water to split open rock, allowing gas to flow more freely out of the well.
Industrial Revolution: a period in history (mid 1700s through late 1800s) when there was a surge of new advances in science and technology.
infrascture: the basic physical and organizational structures and facilities (e.g., buildings, roads, and power supplies) needed for the operation of a society.
microhabitats: a habitat that is of small or limited extent and which differs in character from some surrounding more extensive habitat.
resource extraction: the act of removing (extracting) minerals and other natural resources from the ground.
topsoil: The thin, rich layer of soil where most nutrients for plants are found.
tropical rainforests: a forest in a tropical region of the world with high annual rainfall.
urban: relating to cities.