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Sustainable Development

Abstract (Summary)
Sachs highlights the gathering at the Earth Institute at Columbia University, New York, to assess the State of the Planet in 2004. Scientists and public policy specialists show their overriding concern centered on global-scale interactions between the growing human population and Earth processes under increasing strain. The conference also underscored the precariousness of the complex social processes linking scientific advance, technological development and adoption, geopolitics, and economics.

Full Text (706 words)
When scientists and public policy specialists gathered at the Earth Institute at Columbia University, New York, to assess the State of the Planet in 2004 (www.earth.columbia.edu/sop2004), their overriding concern centered on global-scale interactions between the growing human population and Earth processes under increasing strain. The fourfold increase of the human population during the past century, coupled with a roughly 4.5-fold increase of economic activity per person, has led to adverse anthropogenic effects on species extinction, ecosystem functions and biodiversity, climate change, groundwater depletion, soil nutrient losses, and zoonotic disease emergence and transmission, with far too little societal effort invested in mitigating these consequences. The world’s poorest people suffer the most because of their narrow margin of survival, lack of access to technologies, vulnerability to natural hazards, and fragility of the ecosystems in which they are concentrated.
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Letter

Climate change

Andrew D. Harris

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Weather
Volume 61, Issue 3, pages 91–92, March 2006
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Climate change

I have read your issue devoted to Climate Change in particular the opening article by Sir John Houghton ("Climate change and sustainable energy", Weather, 60, pp. 179–185). Whilst no-one can doubt his main theme – that temperatures are increasing – it does seem to me that he falls into the trap of over-stating his case.

Sir John joins many others in holding warming responsible for catastrophic weather events particularly flood and heat-

theory were correct, as energy efficiency improves every year, which it has done since the advent of the industrial revolution, overall energy usage should reduce correspondingly. Of course this doesn’t happen – total energy use increases remorselessly.

Sir John places great faith in renewable sources of energy. Many of the ideas he mentions are not new – the first tidal barrage in France, for example, was built decades ago. It is true that this source alone has the potential to supply a significant proportion of the UK’s electricity, but the problem is that most of this would have to
tions in the emissions he wants can be achieved using a variety of small-scale measures, and that this can be done without any large impact on our economic growth. I disagree. All economic activity uses energy and most energy comes from burning fossil fuels. Even from an optimistic view of the contribution of renewables, in the UK they are unlikely to meet its short-term targets for emission reduction, and I believe that government policy in this area, including the target for 2050 that Sir John approvingly mentions several times, is based more on optimism than reality. How can we achieve
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