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The Climax of Humanity: Act

By George Musser

1. Understand the changes. Obvious though be hard to look past the daily headlines to und Demographer Joel E. Cohen paints the broad and older population. The detailed projections issues that they raise.

2. Achieve Millennium Development Goals. This month the United Nations General Assembly is reviewing the mixed progress toward these quantitative goals for reducing poverty and inequality. Economist Jeffrey D. Sachs, head of the U.N. Millennium Project, argues for a concerted aid effort. Besides advancing human well-being, it would ease environmental problems that are linked with poverty, such as air pollution and deforestation.

3. Preserve crucial habitats. Extinction is irreversible, so avoiding it is a top priority. Obscure creatures are not the only victims; economically valuable species, such as sturgeon and wild grain varieties, are also in trouble. Ecologists Stuart L. Pimm and Clinton Jenkins argue that rounding out nature reserves will cost money but bring multiple benefits. Even in narrow economic terms, countries are often better off saving old-growth forest than converting it to farms or ranches.

4. Wean off fossil fuels. The atmosphere can hold only so much carbon dioxide before the climate goes haywire. Reducing emissions requires extensive changes to how we produce and use energy, but Amory B. Lovins, one of the country's most innovative thinkers on the subject, argues that the task is not nearly as daunting or costly as you might think. Accelerating the existing trend toward higher efficiency could do the trick.

5. Provide cheap irrigation to poor farmers. How can we feed all those new mouths without trashing the soil, exhausting aquifers and damming every last river? Development specialist Paul Polak argues that small-scale appropriate technology, such as manual pumps and drip irrigation, can boost yields, stretch out limited water supplies and start farmers on the path to prosperity.

6. Beef up health systems. In rich countries and rapidly developing ones such as China and India, more people now get sick from chronic conditions, such as heart disease and mental illness, than from infections. In poorer countries, malaria, tuberculosis and other bugs remain the big burden. Epidemiologist Barry R. Bloom argues that in both cases, the top priority is better prevention, ranging from vaccines and mosquito nets to antismoking campaigns.

7. Brace for slower growth. Political and financial institutions will have to retool as the economy approaches global constraints. Economist Herman E. Daly argues for new ways to collect taxes, set interest rates, and regulate pollution and resource extraction. In an accompanying commentary, economist Partha Dasgupta agrees with much of what Daly says but suggests that rich-country economies are already more sustainable than many people assume.

8. Prioritize more rationally. Right now priorities are set largely by who shouts the loudest or plays golf with the right people. As staff writer W. Wayt Gibbs describes, economists and environmental scientists have been working on better approaches. With costs and benefits properly priced in, markets can act as giant distributed computers that weigh trade-offs. But they can fail, for example, when costs are concentrated and benefits are diffuse.

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