

Harvesting the Biosphere: What We Have Taken from Nature

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Cited in:

Book Reference: Originally published: 21 December 2012

Harvesting the Biosphere: What We Have Taken from Nature

Vaclav Smil

An interdisciplinary and quantitative account of human claims on the biosphere's stores of living matter, from prehistoric hunting to modern energy production.

The biosphere--the Earth's thin layer of life--dates from nearly four billion years ago, when the first simple organisms appeared. Many species have exerted enormous influence on the biosphere's character and productivity, but none has transformed the Earth in so many ways and on such a scale as *Homo sapiens*. In *Harvesting the Biosphere*, Vaclav Smil offers an interdisciplinary and quantitative account of human claims on the biosphere's stores of living matter, from prehistory to the present day. Smil examines all harvests--from prehistoric man's hunting of megafauna to modern crop production--and all uses of harvested biomass, including energy, food, and raw materials. Without harvesting of the biomass, Smil points out, there would be no story of human evolution and advancing civilization; but at the same time, the increasing extent and intensity of present-day biomass harvests are changing the very foundations of civilization's well-being.

In his detailed and comprehensive account, Smil presents the best possible quantifications of past and current global losses in order to assess the evolution and extent of biomass harvests. Drawing on the latest work in disciplines ranging from anthropology to environmental science, Smil offers a valuable long-term, planet-wide perspective on human-caused environmental change.

References

Gupta, M. C., B. M. Gandhi and B. N. Tandon. 1974. Unconventional legume *Prosopis cineraria*. *Am J. Clin. Nutr.* 17:1035-1036.