

How Many People Can the Earth Feed?

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The Very Simplicity and directness of the question posed in the title guarantee that it will be asked again and again. But taking up the challenge is a futile effort if the answer sought is a single specific value. The underlying complexity of food-population-environment relationships makes it impossible to come up with such an answer even if all the links and feedbacks were known with a high degree of certainty and even if the forecasts were for a limited period of time. Trying to hit the ultimate total would be much like aiming at an unseen and moving target. Forecasts of ranges circumscribed by carefully defined sets of assumptions can be offered with confidence only for periods of less than two decades; some revealing calculations and meaningful comments can be made about the outlook for the next one to two generations, but no 50-60-year forecast can get most of its ingredients right; and even if it did so, the whole setting would still be largely unpredictable: looking back to the early 1930s makes the point convincingly.' Forecasts on a civilizational time scale may be, at best, interesting bits of conjecture, yet there has been no shortage of such estimates during the twentieth century.

References

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