



# Perspective

## Our Resources Problem Needs Definition and Interpretation

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**A**LL SOCIETIES, from the most primitive to the most complicated, are largely shaped by the resources which their members in one form or another employ directly or indirectly to satisfy the desires and the tastes of mankind. One of the presumptions about which there is considerable difference of opinion is that a community which is dynamic, vigorous, expanding, and in which the population is ever growing, will consume more materials of the air, of the earth, and of the waters upon the earth than these three media are capable of supplying over a protracted period of time. In a more limited sense this view of the matter was powerfully stated by Malthus toward the end of the 18th century when he announced his theory that the tendency of population was to increase more rapidly than the subsistence which could be supplied for it. The broader statement of this hypothesis, which underlies so much of the thinking of today, requires re-examination and needs re-assessment. Scarcity and abundance, generally caused by wars, have plagued the world since the dawn of history. If the pessimism of Malthus forecast inadequate supplies as the population continued to grow, he could not have foreseen the scientific contributions that were packed into the 19th century and the first half of the 20th and was unable to appraise the way in which they could make, and in fact have made, available within much of the western world a vast wealth of resources which in the 18th century lay hidden in the darkness of ignorance. It was only some 20 years ago that men here at home were worried lest the world could produce too much. There was too much cotton, there was too much wheat, there was too much copper, there was an oversupply of lead and zinc, indeed there was hardly a commodity to which one can now refer of which it was not said there was an overproduction. Just as it is probably true that the preoccupation of man a fifth of a century ago with overproduction was based upon a fallacy, so it may be true that our concern today with scarcities is derived from a too narrow view of all of the factors, scientific and economic, that play their roles in creating what, from moment to moment or even year to year to decade to decade, appears to be a real but transient condi-

tion of affairs. It may be that the market place, preserved as a free institution, and a flourishing inventive science will be unable to reconcile scarcity and abundance in accordance with their historic role, but a careful view down the corridors of time suggests the question. Does burden of proof fall heavily upon those who hold the view that man's ingenuity, combined with the price mechanism, individual initiative, private enterprise, generally, and research is incapable of resolving the problems, which, unmolested and undisturbed and unmagnified by wars and threats of wars, it has historically been capable of resolving, without a too-abrupt distortion of the social fabric?

In a sense, whether this hypothesis, which I have suggested needs re-examination, be generally accepted or widely rejected, there still remains a fruitful field for the definition of issues and the interpretation of facts with which the question of natural resources is associated. Our own history has demonstrated that it is easy for a people to plunder that which nature has made available to them. Moreover, even if it were not easy to plunder there are many different uses to which materials and resources may be put and many ways in which they may be prudently conserved. There are, therefore, a host of contradictory interests in and claimants for a wide order of our resources.

We are all disposed to live in our own personal prison-houses which chain our minds and confine our intellectual horizons. Often the prison-house blocks out the light that other people's activities and minds shed upon our mental landscape and we become in fact the captives of our own interests. This has both its merits and its demerits, but no one can successfully deny the proposition that it is helpful for all of us to become acutely aware of our own limited understanding and of the parochial nature of our own tastes and predilections. To understand more fully the preoccupations of others and the reasons for these preoccupations is what marks the progress of mankind toward freedom. This is what provides the guideposts for advancement and illuminates the way. (*Excerpts from an address on the purpose of the Mid-Century Conference on Resources for the Future, Dec. 2, 1953*)