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Reflections on the Fenner Conference

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Introduction and overview

It was fitting that the keynote address to the 2013 Fenner Conference was given by Paul Ehrlich, as he was co-author of the landmark book which first drew together these three critical issues (Ehrlich and Ehrlich 1970). As that book showed over 40 years ago, a growing human population compounded by increasing resource use per person inevitably puts pressure on the natural environment. The obvious conclusion of the contributions gathered in this book is that human civilisation now faces a crisis. It is clearly impossible for all humans to use resources at the level of contemporary Australians. It is equally impossible for Australia to continue on the growth trajectory assumed by almost all politicians, even if we could ignore the impacts of our consumption on the rest of the world. We are already seeing serious environmental consequences of the current level of total consumption, but most decision-makers assume and welcome both further population growth and increasing per capita consumption, putting compounding pressure on natural systems.