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## Population and Environmental Services

Vaclav Smil

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## Population and Environmental Services

VACLAV SMIL

There is no escape from reductionism in modern science. Even those subjects that should retain some semblance of holistic approach—if not being the very paragons of it—end up being chopped up into pieces that may be convenient for standard intellectual transactions but that are distortions of not just vastly more complex, but also highly dynamic, realities. And so we have population and food, population and water, population and climate, population and whatever (supply a shard of suitably truncated reality suiting your taste)—as if any of these subjects could be treated independently of many other factors, that is, as if there were no complex links and feedbacks among them. All of this is true about the nexus I have agreed, with a great deal of doubt, to write about. The impossibility of defining clearly the very meaning of environmental services makes the task even more questionable.

Transferring the terms “goods” and “services” from common economic usage would seem to make a clear distinction: environmental goods range from fossil fuels and timber to fish and wild animals. Nature took care of their production and we just extract, harvest, kill, or domesticate them. Environmental services, also rendered freely by nature, include a large and disparate group of benefits ranging from pollination of crops to soil formation, and from pest control to decomposition of dead organic matter and the recycling of nutrients.

Although this distinction is made repeatedly in the rather slim literature on the subject of environmental services, I will argue that these services should not be separated from the much better known, and vastly better studied, category of environmental goods. These, in turn, are merely a convenient subset yanked out of the total environment by our utilitarian approach to nature. Consequently, it is the maintenance of the greatest possible integrity of the entire biosphere—rather than a preoccupation with arbitrarily, and questionably, defined particulars—that would provide fu-


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