People and Their Environment

The people of Africa south of the Sahara face tremendous difficulties in achieving a better life. Many environmental challenges threaten the region's supply of food, its health care, and its plant and animal life. Yet Africans south of the Sahara, like their neighbors around the globe, look to the future with hope.

Voices Around the World

"This is the place where, two and a half million years ago, humans and animals first converged, sharing some of Earth's most spectacular ground. Today, with competition for resources on the rise, convergence has become collision, fueling war, disease, and extinction. Yet despite such calamities, Africa is alive with stories of renewal."

—David Quammen, "Africa: Views of the Continent," National Geographic, September 2005
Managing Resources

MAIN Idea In Africa south of the Sahara, factors such as poverty, population growth, war, and drought have caused a severe strain on the environment.

GEOGRAPHY AND YOU In what other regions of the world are natural resources severely strained? Read to learn about the causes of food shortages in Africa south of the Sahara.

Today millions of people in Africa south of the Sahara must focus on survival. Poverty and hunger are their bitterest enemies. In the 1990s, for example, many thousands of people died of starvation in the Horn of Africa—the bulge of land that juts into the Indian Ocean and includes the countries of Somalia, Ethiopia, and Djibouti (jih•BO•te•ee). Drought and human activities, such as wars, contributed to the famine, an extreme scarcity of food. Today famine threatens many parts of Africa, and over 14 million people in the Horn of Africa alone are in dire need of food aid.

Desertification

Although never as fertile as land to the south and east, the Sahel region once supported life. Not so long ago, pastoral peoples grazed livestock in the Sahel. Their animals helped fertilize the soil, and farming was possible. Today, however, a wide area of the Sahel has turned into desert. As the climate has become drier and as people and animals have stripped the Sahel of its vegetation, the desert has crept farther south, spreading into the countries of Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Chad, and Sudan. In this region of the world, carrying capacity—the number of people an area of land can support on a sustained basis—has already been greatly exceeded.

Droughts, which have always occurred in the semiarid Sahel, have recently become severe there and in other parts of Africa south of the Sahara. Beginning in the 1970s, severe droughts in these areas helped turn farmland into wasteland. Since 1998, drought has killed crops and livestock across East Africa, threatening the lives of millions of people. Throughout the region, most people earn a living as subsistence farmers. Drought, like the one in East Africa in 2009, can therefore lead to a serious food crisis. It left about 10 million people in need of food aid.

Still, the long-term causes of the hunger remain, such as the relentless spread of desert and drought. 'As the Sahara comes, the farms get smaller,' says Abdou Bellas Marafa, chief of Canton Kyibir, a town in southern Niger.

"Altho—Ahbrahc MeLaughlin and Christiah Allen Purefoy, "Hunger Is Spreading in Africa," The Christian Science Monitor, August 1, 2005

In 2000 the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) warned that famine could become a problem in central Africa because of unpredictable weather patterns and large numbers of refugees. In West Africa, good harvests have boosted food supplies in most countries. Civil war, however, threatens to disrupt the distribution of food in Sierra Leone, Liberia, and Guinea.
 Conflict and Hunger

War continues to be a major cause of hunger and malnutrition in Africa south of the Sahara. Since 1990, conflicts in countries such as Liberia, Sudan, Somalia, and Rwanda have halted economic growth, caused widespread starvation, and cost the lives of countless Africans. Huge refugee populations fleeing war-torn areas and crossing borders into neighboring countries strain already meager food resources. Ongoing civil conflict in Somalia, which has been without a government since 1991, endangers more than two million people, including relief workers. Looting and fighting severely hamper food distribution.

In Sudan about 6 million people need urgent food aid. Most of Sudan’s people depend on subsistence farming, making them vulnerable to the country’s periodic droughts. In addition, more than 20 years of civil war between the Muslim Arab government in the north and non-Muslim rebels in the south have torn Sudan apart and created the world’s largest refugee population. International aid workers have tried to meet the enormous food needs of the refugees, but warring factions continue to raise obstacles. In 2000, for example, rebel groups began to tax relief work, forcing many aid agencies to leave the country. A peace deal was signed in 2005 between the warring factions, but in the Darfur region of western Sudan there is a separate, ongoing conflict, which the UN has described as the world’s worst humanitarian crisis.

If the problem of hunger is to be solved, peace within the region is critical. Some countries and groups are moving toward peace. Ethiopia and Eritrea signed a peace agreement in 2000 after two years of conflict. Tensions remain high, and maintaining peace will be a great challenge. However, the Eritreans and Ethiopians have been working to undo the damage caused by drought and civil war.

Farming in Peace

After Eritrea gained its independence from Ethiopia in 1993, farmers in both countries worked to improve the land. Farmers in the northern Ethiopian province of Tigray terraced more than 250,000 acres (about 101,250 ha) of land and planted 42 million young trees to hold soil in place. They also built earthen dams to store precious rainwater. Grain crops thrived in their fields. In Eritrea crops were so abundant that the government was able to reduce its request for relief from other countries by 50 percent.

When Ethiopia and Eritrea went to war over their shared border, however, many people lost their homes or lives. Then one of the worst droughts in years struck the region. Although drought continues, a shaky peace is allowing farmers to restore the land, bringing hope to the area’s people.

Humanitarian organizations like Doctors Without Borders (Médecins Sans Frontières) and the International Red Cross have helped by sending medical teams and relief workers. Feeding centers, for example, have nursed many malnourished children and adults back to health in war-torn countries.

READING Check Regions How has conflict affected food production and supply in Africa south of the Sahara?
Human Impact

**MAIN Idea** Human activities have destroyed rain forests, threatened wildlife, and raised questions about land use in Africa south of the Sahara.

**GEOGRAPHY AND YOU** How have human activities affected the environment in other regions of the world? Read to learn about the human impact on the environment in Africa south of the Sahara.

People in Africa south of the Sahara are struggling with problems of land use. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, tropical forests were disappearing at a rate of more than 12 million acres (4.9 million ha) per year. The impact of hunting and tourism has also raised difficult questions about the region's land use.

**Tropical Forests**

In 1990 tropical forests covered almost 1.5 billion acres (608 million ha) in the region. By 2000, 126 million acres (51 million ha) had disappeared, due mostly to the clearing of land by loggers and farmers. Côte d'Ivoire and Madagascar have each lost more than 90 percent of their forests. On the continent as a whole, about half of the original tropical forests are gone.

In response, various countries have created forest reserves to protect tropical forests. Logging companies are also getting involved, using scientific tree farming and replanting projects to protect and renew forests.

**Endangered Animals**

Deforestation destroys animal habitats, or living areas. Today hundreds of animal species in Madagascar that exist nowhere else in the world are in danger of extinction, or disappearance from the Earth. The threat to wildlife exists elsewhere, too. As the region's population grows, farmers have moved into some forested areas to find land for farming. Some savannas, home to huge herds of animals—such as elephants, giraffes, antelopes, and lions—are being plowed for farming. Brush fires also have played a part. As a result, many species have greatly decreased in number.

Hunting also threatens the region's wildlife. During the colonial period, European hunters reduced animal populations significantly. In recent years, hunters have continued to pursue African game for sport and profit. Two million elephants roamed the region in the early 1970s. Today fewer than 600,000 remain, largely because of poaching, or illegal hunting. Other animals at risk include the Cape Mountain zebra, the mountain gorilla, and the rhinoceros.

**The Ivory Trade**

African elephants once roamed in great numbers across the continent. Biologists estimate that in 1930, Africa was home to 5 to 10 million elephants. During the last century, however, elephants were slaughtered by the tens of thousands for meat, for sport, and especially for their ivory. Both male and female African elephants grow tusks—the world's main source of ivory. When the price of ivory soared in the 1970s, elephant tusks became very valuable. Gun-carrying poachers began illegally killing elephants for their tusks. As many as 80,000 elephants a year were shot.

In 1989, African elephants were placed on the endangered species list. Trade in ivory was banned worldwide. In 1997, however, Botswana, Namibia, and Zimbabwe were given approval to sell their government stockpiles of ivory to Japan. The sales went forward, but not without controversy. Supporters stressed that only government stockpiles were sold and that no elephants were killed. Opponents feared that even a partial lifting of the ban would lead to more poaching.

**Reading Check** Regions What actions are being taken to protect Africa's tropical forests?
Challenges for the Future

MAIN Idea As Africa south of the Sahara faces the future, human activities continue to have both positive and negative impacts on the environment.

GEOGRAPHY AND YOU What environmental challenges does the United States face? Read to find out about the future outlook for Africa south of the Sahara.

People in Africa south of the Sahara are working to overcome some of the region's serious challenges. The region has already taken important steps, however, toward preserving the environment. Democratic reforms are taking root in countries such as Ghana, Nigeria, and Liberia. Efforts to encourage private enterprise have also had positive results. New ranching laws, for example, have allowed people to engage in crocodile farming, a highly profitable business that has brought this species back from low numbers due to trapping and hunting. Rhinoceroses and elephants are also beginning to thrive again as their habitats are protected and as poaching is discouraged by stricter laws.

To save endangered species, some countries have created huge game reserves. These reserves—which include Tanzania’s Serengeti National Park, Kenya’s Masai Mara, and Ghana’s Kakum National Park—have helped some animals make a comeback. The parks also attract millions of tourists each year. Ecotourism, or tourism based on concern for the environment, has become a big business in parts of the region, bringing millions of dollars into African economies. Governments give rural peoples an economic stake in the reserves. Some train to work in the reserves as trail guides or become involved in development planning.

Increasingly, the protection of tropical forests is a priority in the region. In 1999 leaders from six central African countries signed an agreement to preserve the forests. The effects of this and similar efforts have yet to be seen, but they are a strong signal that Africans today are moving toward a more positive future.

READING Check Human-Environment Interaction
What has helped bring crocodiles back from low numbers due to trapping and hunting in the region?

SECTION 2 REVIEW

Vocabulary
1. Explain the significance of: carrying capacity, habitat, extinction, poaching, ecotourism.

Main Ideas
2. How have poverty, population growth, war, and drought caused severe strain on the environment in Africa south of the Sahara?
3. What kinds of human activities have destroyed large areas of the region’s tropical forests and threatened wildlife?
4. Create a diagram like the one below to show the environmental challenges facing Africa south of the Sahara. List the causes and effects of each challenge. Be sure to consider the positive and negative impacts of each challenge.

Critical Thinking
5. Answering the Essential Question How do you think war has contributed to desertification in the region?
6. Summarizing Information What is the central issue in the debate over the renewal of the ivory trade?
7. Analyzing Visuals Study the map of carrying capacity in Africa south of the Sahara on page 565. In what parts of the region has the land’s carrying capacity not been exceeded?

Writing About Geography
8. Expository Writing Think about the challenges Africa south of the Sahara faces today. Choose one problem in the region that might have an impact on the rest of the world. Write a paragraph explaining why the problem is a global issue.

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