

# GLOSSARY

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Note: relevant places in the text where glossary terms are mentioned are marked in bold.

**Aerosols** Aggregations of minute particles (solid or liquid) suspended in the atmosphere. The term is often used to describe smoke, dust, condensation nuclei, freezing nuclei, fog, or pollutants such as droplets containing sulfur dioxide or nitrogen dioxide.

**Aggradation** The building upward or outward of the land surface by the deposition of sediment.

**Albedo** A measure for the reflectivity of a body or surface, defined as the total radiation reflected by the body divided by the total radiation falling on it. Values are expressed on a scale of either 0–1 or 1–100%.

**Allochthonous** Formed at a distance from its present position (see Autochthonous).

**Aquifer** An underground water-bearing layer of porous rock through which water can flow.

**Autochthonous** Formed in its present position, rather than by transport processes.

**Biodegradation** The breakdown or rendering harmless of a substance by natural processes.

**Biodiversity** The variety of species, both floral and faunal, contained within an ecosystem.

**Biomass** The total mass of biological material contained in a given area of the Earth's surface (expressed as dry weight or per unit area).

**Biosphere** The interlinked communities of animals, plants and microorganisms that live on Earth.

**Boreal** Of northern regions. A term applied both to a climatic zone characterized by cold, snowy winters and short summers, and to the coniferous forests of the high mid-latitudes in the Northern Hemisphere, also known as taiga.

**Channelization** The modification of river channels for the purpose of flood control, land drainage, navigation and the reduction or prevention of erosion.

**Chaparral** A type of stunted (scrub) woodland found in temperate regions with dry summers (Mediterranean regions). It is dominated by drought-resistant evergreen shrubs.

**Chlorofluorocarbons** A range of synthetically manufactured, chemically inert compounds (CFC) containing atoms of carbon, fluorine and chloride. They have been developed and widely used as solvents, refrigerant and aerosol propellants and in the manufacture of foam plastics.

**Climax** The final stage of plant succession, when the plant community is relatively stable and in equilibrium with the existing environmental conditions. It is normally determined by climate (climatic climax) or by soil (edaphic climax).

**Coral bleaching** Corals are bleached when the colorful symbiotic algae they house are lost. When the algae are absent for any length of time, the coral dies. This absence can be caused by excessively warm water temperatures.

**Critical loads** A concept in pollution studies which involves the idea that there is a certain pollution load level (e.g., of acid rain) above which harmful effects on biological systems will occur.

**Deflation** The removal of dry, unconsolidated material, e.g., dust or sand, from a surface by wind.

**Deforestation** The permanent removal of trees from an area of forest or woodland.

**Desertification** The spread of desert-like conditions in arid or semi-arid areas, due to human interference or climatic change, or both.

**DNA** (deoxyribonucleic acid). The substance that is the carrier of genetic information, found in the chromosomes of the nucleus of a cell.

**Domestication** The taming and breeding of previously wild animals and plants for human use.

**Dust storm** A storm, particularly in dry areas, which carries dense clouds of dust, sometimes to a great height, often obscuring visibility to below 1000 m.

**Ecological footprint** The area that is impacted by pollution, resource extraction, development and transport from a particular location (e.g., a city).

**Ecology** The science which studies the relations between living organisms and their environment.

**ENSO** (El Niño–Southern Oscillation). Periodical disturbances of Pacific Ocean and atmosphere, with El Niño conditions being abnormally warm off the coast of South America and La Niña conditions being abnormally cool.

**Eutrophication** The process by which an aquatic ecosystem increases in productivity as a result of increased nutrient input. Often this is due to human-induced additions of elements such as nitrogen and phosphorus (cultural eutrophication). However, the process may also be a natural phenomenon.

**Forest decline** The decline of forest vitality characterized by decreased and abnormal growth, leading eventually to death. The causes include poor management

practices; climatic change; fungal, viral and pest attack; nutrient deficiency; and atmospheric pollution.

**Genetic engineering** The technology involved in manipulating the genes (molecular building blocks) of organisms. Organisms treated in this way are called genetically modified organisms (GMOs).

**Gleying** Soil characteristics (including mottling) developed as a result of poor drainage and intermittent waterlogging reducing oxidation or causing the deoxidation of ferric compounds.

**Global change** Largely synonymous with ‘global environmental change’, it refers to changes in the global environment (including climate change) that may alter the capacity of the Earth to sustain life.

**Green Revolution** An agricultural revolution, especially in the less developed countries of Asia in the 1960s and 1970s, which gave rise to increased food production through the introduction of new high-yielding varieties of crops and the adoption of techniques (e.g., synthetic fertilizers) necessary to grow them.

**Groyne** A construction, usually at right angles to the coast and jutting into the sea, to combat long shore drifting of sediment and beach erosion.

**Habitat** The place in which an organism lives, characterized by its physical features or the dominant plant types.

**Heinrich event** Deposition of iceberg rafted debris in ocean core sediments because of rapid ice sheet decay during the Pleistocene. They are periods of rapid climate change.

**Hominid** Primates of a family (Hominidae) which includes humans and their fossil ancestors.

**Hybridization** The process that results from a cross between parents of differing genotypes. A good example is the mule, produced by crossbreeding an ass and a horse. Hybrids may be fertile or sterile depending on differences in the genomes of the two parents.

**Infiltration capacity** The capacity of the soil surface to absorb water. If the capacity is exceeded, ponding will occur and surface runoff may result.

**Isostasy** A process that causes Earth’s crust to rise or sink according to whether a weight is removed or added to it. Such a weight could be, for example, an ice cap (glacio-isostasy).

**Karstic** Relating to a limestone region (or another type of soluble rock) with underground drainage and many cavities and passages caused by the solution of the rock.

**Keystone species** A species whose removal from the ecosystem of which it forms a part leads to a series of adverse effects (including extinctions) in that system.

**Land cover** The physical state of the land, embracing, for example, the quantity and type of surface vegetation, water and earth materials. The state may change as a result of land use changes.

**Laterite** A residual deposit formed by the chemical weathering of rock, composed primarily of hydrated iron and aluminum oxides. It is extensively developed in the humid and subtropical regions.

**Levee** A natural or man-made embankment along a river.

**Little Ice Age** A period of glacial advance and cold weather (neoglaciation) that took place between c. AD 1550 and AD 1850.

**Maquis** Scrub vegetation of evergreen shrubs, characteristic of the western Mediterranean; broadly equivalent to chaparral.

**Mass balance of glaciers** The sum of all processes which add mass to a glacier (e.g., snowfall, glaciers, avalanches) and remove mass from it (e.g., melting, ice berg calving).

**Mass movement** The downward movement of material under the influence of gravity on a slope (e.g., landslips, mudflows, etc.).

**Permafrost** The thermal conditions in soil and rock where temperatures are below 0° for at least two consecutive years.

**Photochemical** Relating to a chemical reaction which is speeded up by particular wavelengths of electromagnetic radiation (e.g., sunlight).

**Piezometric** Relating to a subterranean surface marking the level to which water will rise within an aquifer.

**Podzolized** Relating to a soil that has been characterized by the acidification of the A horizon, the downward leaching of cations, metals and humic substances and their deposition in the B horizon, often precipitating to form a pan.

**Radiative forcing** A change in average net radiation at the top of the troposphere resulting from a change

in either solar or infrared radiation due to a change in atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations.

**Savanna** A grassland, often with scattered trees, of the tropics and subtropics.

**Secondary forest** Woodland which has regenerated and colonized an area after the original (primary) forest has been removed.

**Steric effect** In the context of sea level change, the change in sea level caused by changes in the volume of water in the oceans in response to temperature changes.

**Succession** The sequence of changes in a plant community as it develops over time and eventually leading to climax.

**Sunspot** A dark area on the visible surface of the sun. Their number usually reaches a maximum every 11 years.

**Synanthrope** An organism that benefits from association with humans.

**Thermokarst** Topographical depressions resulting from the thawing of ground ice (permafrost).

**Trophic** Relating to the positions that organisms occupy in a food chain.

**Tropospheric** Relating to the lowest level of the atmosphere, in which most of our weather occurs. The troposphere lies beneath the stratosphere and its thickness ranges from about 7 km at the poles to about 28 km at the equator.

**Tundra** The zone between the latitudinal limits of tree growth and polar ice, characterized by severe winters and a short growing season.

**Turbidity** A measure of the lack of clearness in a liquid caused by the presence of suspended material.

**Wallace's Line** A line, developed initially by A. R. Wallace, that separates the distinct flora and fauna of south east Asia from that of Australasia.

**Wetland** An ecosystem whose formation has been dominated by water (e.g., a marsh or swamp), and whose processes and characteristics are largely controlled by water.

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# INDEX

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Note: page numbers in *italics* refer to figures, those in **bold** refer to tables.

- Aberfan (South Wales) disaster 176–7
- acid deposition 105, 219–23
  - dry 219
- acid mine drainage 150
- acid precipitation deposition 105
- acid rain 148–9, 219–23
  - ecological consequences 221
  - weathering 174
- acid rock drainage 150
- acid sulfate soils 104–5
- acidification
  - clear-felling 154
  - reversal 149
  - soil 103–5
- aerosols 202–4, 306
- affluence 10
- afforestation 98
  - peat drainage 137
  - runoff depletion 120
  - stream flow 137
  - water budget effects 207
- Africa
  - dust emissions 288
  - forest islands 33
  - grasslands 41–2
  - soil erosion 113
- Afromontane grasslands 41–2
- aggradation 125, 306
- aggregates for concrete 162
- agricultural communities, instability 302
- agricultural machinery 115
  - size 114
- agriculture 12, 13–18
  - accelerated mass movement 177
  - chemical pollution 146–52
  - discharges into sea 156, 157
  - industrialization 18
  - intensification 80
  - New World 15–16
  - Old World 15–16
  - pollution impact 146
  - productivity and soil drainage 107–8
  - soil erosion 110–16, 296
  - swidden 36–7
  - see also* pastoralism; shifting agriculture
- Agrostemma githago* (corncockle) 61–2
- air pollution 198, 217–23
  - forest decline 60
  - plant impacts 56–9
  - soil acidification 105
  - weathering 174
  - wild animal effects 78
- aircraft, water vapor discharge 204
- Aitlan, Lake (Central America) 71
- albedo 198, 306
  - boreal forests 206
  - clouds 204
  - modification 229
  - rain forest removal 206
  - sea-ice feedback 279
  - vegetation impact 204–6
- Alchmophorus occidentalis* (western grebe) 76
- algal stromatolite growth 293
- alien species *see* invasions
- alluvial fans 284–5
- aluminium 145
  - soil accumulation 103
  - solubility with acid deposition 221
  - toxicity 149
- aluminium foil 228
- aluminium smelters 58
- Amazon basin deforestation 206
- Amazonia, human impact 25
- Amsterdam Declaration (2001) 304
- animals
  - biomass turnover 84–5
  - breeding 63
  - decline 78–81
  - dispersal 66–70
  - domestication 13–14, 15–16, 65–6
  - dwarfing 86
  - feedlots 118, 148
  - introductions 55
  - invasion 66–70
  - population expansion 70–4
  - species survival 88
  - waste 148
  - see also* extinctions
- Antarctica
  - global warming 274
  - ice sheets 246, 270, 271
- antelope, Saiga 74
- anthropogenic overkill hypothesis 85–6
- anthropogeomorphology 160
- aquifers 306
  - levels 244
- Arabian Gulf (Middle East), salt-plains 254

- aragonite saturation 251  
 Aral Sea (CIS) 138, 139  
   deflation 101  
   river diversion 207  
   shrinkage 99, 244, 292  
 Arctic Sea ice  
   decline 278–9  
   removal 228  
 arctic-alpine tundra loss 236  
 Argentina, Pampa grasslands 49  
   alien species 54  
 arithmetic-exponential view of population trends 8, 9  
 arithmetic-logistic view of population trends 8, 9  
 arroyo trenching 171–4, 292  
 arsenic 78, 150  
   emissions 78  
 artesian aquifer, overpumping 168  
 Ascension Island (South Atlantic) 3–4  
 ash trees 60–1  
 Aswan High Dam (Egypt) 124, 127, 188  
   Nile delta recession 255, 257  
 atmosphere  
   greenhouse gas residence time 201  
   particulate matter 57, 58  
 ‘attrition effect’ 84  
 Australia  
   aboriginal fire use 25  
   animal introductions 67–8  
   rabbit introduction 72  
   salinity 98  
   *Salvinia* spread 62  
   sheep grazing 31  
   water buffalo introduction 67–8  
 avalanches, debris 277  
  
 ballast water discharge 157  
 Baltic Sea, phosphate concentrations 156  
 Bangkok (Thailand) 255  
 Bangladesh  
   precipitation 266, 267  
   river discharge 266, 267  
   sea-level rise 254  
 barrages 127  
 bays, sedimentation 165  
 beaches  
   coastal protection 185  
   erosion 185  
   sand/shingle reservoirs 187  
   sandy 256–7  
 bedrock, acid rain effects 221  
 beech woodland 237  
 beetle  
   black long-snouted weevil 28  
   Japanese 67, 68  
 bioaccumulation 76  
 biodegradation 306  
   oil spills 76  
 biodiversity 306  
   ecosystem stability 303  
   hot-spots 92  
   loss with invasive species 55  
 biogeomorphic response model 241  
 biological control 74  
 biomass 306  
   grass 31  
   turnover in animals 84–5  
 biosphere 306  
   changes 235–8  
   component indicators 20–1  
 biostasis 242  
  
 birds  
   cities 70–1  
   culling 82  
   decline 81  
   fish-eating 75–6  
   land 81–2  
   oil pollution 76  
   protection legislation 300  
   synanthropes 72–3  
 birth control 8  
 bison decline 81  
 Black Sea, phosphate concentrations 156  
 blackbird 72–3  
 ‘blitzkrieg’ effect 84  
 Blytt–Sernander climate change model 50  
 boats 16  
 bomb craters 161  
 boreal forests  
   albedo 206  
   extent 236  
 boron 102  
 borrow pits 161  
 Boulder Dam (USA) 122  
 Boussingault, Jean-Baptiste 3–4  
 bracken 31, 56  
 breakwaters 185–6, 187  
 Britain  
   accelerated sedimentation 165, 166  
   excavation features 160  
   grazing 31–2  
   heather burning 116  
   hedgerow removal 78–9  
   mammal introductions 74  
   nitrates in groundwaters 147  
   peat bogs 173–4  
   plant invasions 56  
   pollutant reduction 215  
   post-glacial vegetation change 50–1  
   rabbit introduction 71–2  
   runoff 263–4  
   soil erosion 113, 115  
   uplands 31–2  
 British Nature Conservation 299–300  
 Bronze Age, sedimentation rate 165  
 Brunhes, Jean 5  
 Bruun Rule 257  
 Buffon, Georges-Louis, Count 3  
 building stone decay 268  
 bunds 127  
 burning  
   chaparral 116–17  
   controlled 28  
   environmental restoration 28  
   heather 116  
   land preparation for cultivation 24, 25  
   oil wells 204  
   peat bog loss 174  
   savanna biomass 203  
   *see also* coal burning; fire  
 bush encroachment on savanna 41  
 butterflies, decline 79–80  
  
*Cactoblastus* moth 62  
 cadmium 150  
 Cairo (Egypt), urban salinity 99  
 calcification of coral reefs 250, 251  
 calcium aluminate 294  
 calcium carbonate 107  
 California (USA), precipitation 265–6  
*Calluna* (heather) 52, 116  
 Canada, industrial fumes 58  
  
 canals  
   irrigation 97, 103, 129  
   tank landscape 125, 127  
 capture, range loss 90  
 carbon  
   dissolved organic 154  
   elemental 216  
   sinks 98  
   soil 105  
 carbon dioxide  
   atmospheric 198, 199–200, 233  
   desert environment 287  
   coral reefs 251  
   rainfall–runoff relationship 291  
   tree growth impact 238  
   weathering 174  
 carbonic acid 174  
 cash-crops, restriction of nomadic pastoralists 47  
 Caspian Sea (Central Asia) 137–8  
   level decline 244, 292  
   river diversion 207  
 cattle  
   domestication 66  
   soil compaction 106  
 cereals, autumn-sown 115  
 Chad, Lake (Sahel) 292  
 chalk  
   addition to light land 104, 160  
   pits 160  
 change, susceptibility to 301–3  
 channelization 80, 127–30, 306  
   ecological consequences 128–9, 130  
   Mississippi River 190  
 channels  
   aggradation 165, 180–1  
   arid regions 291–2  
   bypass 129  
   deliberate modification 178  
   discharge diminution 179–80  
   diversion 129  
   floodwater 129  
   instability 284–5  
   irrigation 97, 103, 129  
   nondeliberate changes 178–83  
   sediment load 179–80  
 chaparral 306  
   burning 29, 116–17  
   carbon dioxide impact on growth 238  
   soil erosion 116–17  
*Charadrius dubius* (little ringed plover) 71  
 Chesapeake Bay (USA) 265  
 China  
   acid rain 223  
   glacier retreat 276, 277–8  
   lakes 292  
   chlorinated hydrocarbons 157  
   chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) 11, 200, 201, 306  
   atmospheric concentration 233  
   global production 226  
   ozone layer depletion 224–5  
   production 202  
   release 202  
 cities 18–19  
   bird species 70–1  
   coastal 163  
   *see also* urbanization  
 civilization 13  
 clay soils  
   addition to peat soils 115  
   drainage 108  
   improvement 107  
 Clear Creek (Wyoming) 286

- Clear Lake (California) 76
- clear-felling  
acidification 154  
nitrate-nitrogen effects 153, 154  
stream flow 134, 135
- clear-water erosion 125
- Clements' Theory of Succession 301
- cliffs 256  
erosion 185, 256
- climate  
deliberate modification 226–9  
geomorphology 239–40, 241, 242  
projections 233–4  
world 196–8
- climate change  
extinctions 92–3  
forests 206–7  
irrigation 207  
lakes 207–8  
migration 85  
model 50, 85  
reservoirs 207–8  
urban agglomerations 208–11  
water diversion schemes 207  
*see also* greenhouse gases
- clothing 11
- clouds 198  
albedo 204  
formation 202–3  
seeding 226–7  
trapping by forests 207
- coal burning  
legislation restricting 215  
pollution 212  
sulfur dioxide emissions 213, 215
- coal mining, seismic activity 195
- coastal depression 170
- coastal dunes 183–5
- coastal erosion  
accelerated 185–92  
dams causing 188  
global warming impacts 282  
permafrost decay 282  
sand dune degradation 191  
vegetation anthropogenic modification 191
- coastal systems 243–58  
arid-zone 292–3  
cliffs 185, 256  
global warming impacts 234  
ground subsidence 246–9  
population 243  
sandy beaches 256–7  
sea-level rise 244–9  
*see also* deltas; estuaries; mangrove swamps; salt marsh
- coastal zone salinity 100–1
- cold regions, hydrologic systems 263
- colluvial systems 285
- Colorado River (USA) 123, 125  
sediment starvation 258
- combustion, spontaneous 26
- communication 12
- concrete, salt impact 293–4
- conifer plantations 80
- conservation  
in Britain 299–300  
motives 300–1  
need for 5  
wildlife 299
- construction 81, 162–4  
work and soil erosion 117
- contrails 204
- coral(s)  
bleaching 241, 242, 250, 307  
hurricane impacts 260  
mortality 250
- coral atolls, land-birds 81–2
- coral reefs 249–51  
anthropogenic stresses 297, 298  
calcification 250, 251  
carbon dioxide levels 251  
drowned 247  
eutrophication 157  
pollution 77–8  
sea-level rise 250–1  
sea-surface temperatures 250  
temperature tolerance 239
- cord-grass 192–3
- corncockle 61–2
- cottony-cushion scale 74
- counter-urbanization 209
- 'country breezes' 211
- Coweeta catchments (North Carolina) 134, 135
- creosote bush 30, 49
- crops 17  
evolution 63  
management 118  
replacement of forests 206–7
- cryosphere 270–83  
global warming impacts 234  
melting 243
- cultivation 13  
no-tillage 107
- cultural change, climatic change 86
- cultural development, stages 7
- cyclones, tropical *see* hurricanes
- Cyrobagus* (black long-snouted weevil) 62
- dams 121–5, 126, 127  
bioinvasions 55–6  
Boulder Dam (USA) 122  
channel aggradation 180–1  
coastal sediment budgets 188–90  
Colorado River (USA) 258  
environmental consequences 123, 124  
Hoover Dam (USA) 122, 125  
irrigation 97  
large 122–5, 125, 126, 126–7, 127  
MacMillan Dam (Pecos River, New Mexico) 168  
reservoir creation 181  
sediment load  
coastal erosion 188  
of river 123  
tank landscape 125, 127  
Three Gorges Dam (China) 123  
Vaiont Dam (Italy) 177, 195  
*see also* Aswan High Dam (Egypt)
- Danum Valley (Sabah) 242
- DBPs 146
- DDD 76
- DDT 75–6, 217  
controls 76  
Great Lakes levels 151  
pollution 145, 148
- Dead Sea 138, 139
- death-rate control 8
- debris-avalanche production 113
- deflation 47, 101, 307  
eolian processes 30
- deforestation 3, 4, 32–8, 307  
accelerated mass movement 177  
albedo change 205  
carbon dioxide levels 199, 200
- Easter Island 84
- eutrophication 152
- floods 133
- lateritization 103
- Mesolithic 50
- metalworking 17
- phases 32–3  
rate 35, 37  
estimation 34–5  
salinity 152  
sea-level rise 245  
soil erosion 110–16  
stream temperatures 155  
tropical rain forests 34–5, 36, 37, 38  
twentieth century 18
- water  
quality 152–4  
yield 134  
water budget effects 207
- deglaciation 273
- deltas  
arid-zone coasts 293  
Mississippi River 191, 252  
sea-level rise 254–5  
sediment starvation 257–8  
sedimentation 100–1, 254  
subsidence 247–8  
*see also* Nile, River, delta
- denudation 286
- desertification 30–1, 42–8, 307  
causes 45–7  
consequences 46  
dust generation 203  
global warming impacts 234  
rate 43  
reversibility 44–5  
sand dune reactivation 183  
spatial character 43–4  
woodcutting 44, 45
- deserts 284  
carbon dioxide levels 287  
global warming impacts 234  
inertia 302–3  
lichen fields 45  
margins 42–8  
past climatic changes 286–7  
resilience 302–3  
sand dune reactivation 183  
valley bottoms 284
- developing countries, pollution 216
- dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane *see* DDT
- dieldrin 148
- diet 11–12
- dikes 127
- dimethylsulfide (DMS) 204
- diseases  
control 8  
transmission with climate change 85
- dispersal  
ability 88  
animals 66–70  
plant 54
- diversity 301–2
- domestication 3, 5, 307  
animals 13–15, 16, 65–6  
distinction from cultivation 13  
plants 14–15, 53
- Douglas fir 235
- drainage  
density 286  
downstream flood incidence 137  
flood risk 108  
mine waters 150

- drainage (*cont'd*)  
   nitrates 148  
   peat bogs 173–4  
   riverbed marshes 292  
   soil 107–8  
   subsidence 169–70  
   sustainable urban systems 133, 135  
   thaw lakes 283  
   wetlands 108, 245  
 dredging 130–1  
   coral reef damage 77  
 drought  
   desertification 45–6  
   ENSO fluctuations 287  
   sand dune changes 289, 290  
 drylands 284–94  
 dumping 162–4  
 duricrusts 111  
 dust  
   atmospheric 197–8, 203  
   industrial emissions 203  
   lake bed 292  
   pall 203  
 Dust Bowl (USA) 111, 115, 288  
 dust storms 115, 239, 288–9, 307  
   saline 99–100, 101  
   shifts 285  
 Dutch elm disease 54, 62  
 dwarfing of animals 86  
  
 Earth, orbit 196–7  
 Earth system science 7, 22  
 earthmoving, human actions 162  
 earthquakes  
   reservoir impounding 194  
   subsidence 170  
   triggered by humans 193  
 Easter Island (Pacific Ocean) deforestation 84  
 ecological footprints 307  
   urban agglomerations 18  
   worldwide variation 20  
 ecological movement 6  
 ecology 307  
   laws of 4  
 economic development 13  
 ecosystems  
   diversity 301  
   stability 303  
   vulnerability 302  
 eggshell thickness 75–6  
 Egypt  
   sea-level rise 254  
   urban salinity 99  
 El Niño–Southern Oscillation (ENSO) event 239, 242, 307  
   coral bleaching 250  
   drought 287  
   hurricane activity 261–2  
   lake levels 287  
   rainfall impact 262  
   Sahara boundary 287  
 elasticity 302  
 electricity generating stations, temporary shutdown 155  
 elephants, savanna keystone species 41  
 elm  
   decline 50–1  
   disease 54  
 embankments 127, 128  
 energy  
   resource development 20  
   twentieth century usage 18  
  
 environment  
   degradation 10  
   early studies 4  
   human impact equation 9–10  
   proliferation of human impacts 296–7  
 environmental change  
   global 6–7, 21–2  
   significance 303–4  
 environmental impact 20  
 Environmental Impact Assessment 300  
 environmental revolution 6  
 eolian processes 286, 293  
   deflation 30  
 erodibility 287–8  
 estuaries 130, 255–6  
   inertia 302–3  
   resilience 302–3  
   sea-level rise 255–6  
   sedimentation 165  
 ettringite 294  
 Europe  
   deforestation 32–3  
   heathland 52  
   post-glacial vegetation change 50–1  
   runoff 264–5  
 eutrophication 146, 307  
   accelerated 156  
   coral reefs 157  
   cultural 156  
   deforestation 152  
   hunter gatherers 12  
   sea 157  
 evaporite precipitation 293  
 evapotranspiration  
   cities 209  
   dark soils 228  
   irrigation 97, 245  
   runoff changes 291  
 excavations 160–2  
   filling 163–4  
 exploitation of resources 5  
 explosions, plant 53–6  
 extinctions 81–2  
   modern-day 86–93  
   natural 87  
   prehistoric 83–6  
 Eyre, Lake (North America), flooding 285  
  
 Fabre, Jean Henri 3  
 fan head trenching 284–5  
 Far West Rand (South Africa) 168  
 farming 13  
 fauna, soil 106  
 faunal realms 66  
 fecal pellet deposition 293  
 feedbacks  
   climatic 198  
   vegetation changes on albedo 205  
 feedlots  
   animal concentrations 148  
   erosion prevention 118  
 fens, subsidence 169–70  
 feral animals 69  
   overgrazing 31  
 ferns, aquatic 62  
 fertilizers 63  
   artificial 114  
   nitrate 145  
   soil 109  
 fir, Douglas 235  
 fire 12, 295  
   accelerated mass movement 177  
   animal impact 81, 82  
  
 anthropogenic 25–7, 49  
   crown 27  
   forest 27  
   frequency 238  
   grasslands 27  
     establishment 49  
   heathland maintenance 52  
   intensity 238  
   natural 25–7  
   sanitization 30  
   savanna maintenance 40–1  
   scarification 29  
   soil erosion 116–17  
   soil quality 109  
   successional stages 28  
   suppression 27–8, 29  
   temperatures 27  
   use of 24–5  
   vegetation effects 24–30  
   woody plant suppression 31  
   *see also* burning  
 fire sticks 25  
 fish  
   decline 81, 149, 222  
   gas-bubble disease 81  
   introductions 71, 83  
   kills 148, 149  
   migration 155  
   resources 82  
   spawning 155  
   turbidity tolerance 78  
   twentieth century usage of stocks 19  
 floats 16  
 flood(s)  
   soil drainage 108  
   urbanization impact 131–3, 135  
 flooding  
   control with river channel modification 178  
   deforestation 133  
   glacial lakes 277  
   incidence 260  
   Lake Eyre 285  
   rainfall intensity 260  
   sand dune stabilization 192  
   tidal 256  
 floodplains  
   aggradation 165  
   sediment accumulation 113  
 floodwalls 127  
 floodwater channels 129  
 Florida (USA)  
   hurricanes 262  
   mangrove swamps 253  
 flower-picking 61  
 flue gas desulfurization 223  
 fluoride 58  
 fluvial systems 285  
 fog  
   dispersal 228  
   incidence 215  
   trapping by forests 207  
   *see also* smog  
 food chains 76  
 food supplies 17  
 foraging 13  
 forest(s) 4–5  
   acid rain 221  
   area increase 38  
   boreal 206, 236  
   canopy 111  
   clear cutting 113  
   clearance in Neolithic 51  
   climate change 206–7

- composition changes 235–7  
 cover 25  
 decline 59–61, 307  
 global warming impacts 234  
 growth with acid deposition 222  
 islands 33  
 location changes 235–6, 237  
 precipitation impact 206–7  
 regression 35, 37  
 replacement with crops 206–7  
 riparian 182–3  
 stresses 60  
 temperate 32  
*see also* afforestation; deforestation; rain forests; reforestation
- forest cover  
   definition 32  
   land-use type replacement 135–6
- forest fires 27
- forest road construction 113
- fossil fuel combustion 199–200  
   plankton production 204  
   restriction 223  
   smoke 215  
   sulfur dioxide 213, 215  
   urban areas 208
- freeze–thaw cycles 269
- freeze–thaw processes in permafrost 271
- freshwater  
   acid deposition vulnerability 222  
   cryosphere content 270  
   oil spills 76
- Friedrich 5
- frost weathering 269, 272
- fungi, control by fire 30
- Fynbos Biome (South Africa) 92  
   contraction prediction 237, 239
- game cropping 74
- game-management, Kruger National Park 28
- gasoline *see* petrol
- gathering 8, 11–12
- Gatun Lake (Panama Canal Zone) 71
- general circulation model (GCM) 206
- genetic diversity 62–4  
 genetic engineering 63–4, 307  
 genetic impoverishment 90  
 genetic modification 63  
 genetic swamping 83  
 geomorphology 159–60  
   climate 239–40, 241, 242  
   hydrologic change 266–8
- Georgia (USA) river basin modification 181, 182
- Ghyben–Herzberg principle 100, 101, 294
- glaciers 243, 272  
   advance 277  
   calving 277  
   creep rate 274  
   high-altitude tropical 277  
   mass balance 246  
   melting 245–6  
   monsoonal temperate 276, 277–8  
   retreat 275–7  
   predicted rate 277–8  
   slope failure 282  
   thinning 274  
   valley 274–7  
   volume changes 246  
   warming rate 278
- gleying 104, 307
- global change 6–7, 307
- global climate model (GCM) 235–6
- global warming 233–5  
   Antarctica 274  
   Greenland 274  
   impacts 234  
   landscape sensitivity 234
- globalization 20
- gold mining  
   seismic activity 194  
   subsidence 168
- grass  
   African 30  
   biomass 31  
   grazing 31–2  
   kangaroo 31  
   sand dune stabilization 185, 191–2  
   savanna 37
- grasslands  
   Africa 41–2  
   botanical diversity 79  
   enrichment 63  
   fires 27, 49  
   low productivity 63  
   plowing 16–17  
   seeding 16–17  
   semi-arid 31  
   soil carbon 105
- grazing 30–2  
   river banks 183  
   runoff impact 136  
   shrub dominance 31  
   soil structure 106
- Great Lakes (North America), pollution 151
- Great Plains (USA), sand dune reactivation 289, 290
- Great Salt Lake (USA) 292
- grebe, western 76
- Green Revolution 63, 307
- greenhouse effect 198, 199
- greenhouse gases 199–204  
   atmospheric concentration 201, 202  
   natural changes 198  
   residence time in atmosphere 201
- Greenland  
   global warming 274  
   ice sheets 246, 270, 274  
   lead levels in ice-cap 217, 219
- ground cover 119–20
- ground subsidence 140, 167–70, 171  
   Bangkok 255  
   coastal systems 246–9  
   permafrost degradation 282–3  
   sea-level rise 246–9
- ground-ice  
   depressions 163  
   melting 245
- groundwater 97, 98  
   abstraction 140  
   subsidence 168, 171  
   artificial recharge 142  
   conditions 140–3  
   extraction 100–1  
   irrigation  
     changes and weathering 174, 175  
     water infiltration 245  
   level reduction 140  
   mining 244  
   nitrates 147–8  
   recharge 142–3  
   sea-level rise 244  
   urbanization impact 99
- groyne 185, 187, 307
- Gulf War (1991) 204
- gullies 171–4  
   enlargement 118  
   erosion 120
- gulls 73
- guyots 247
- gypsum bedrock collapse 168
- habitats 8, 307  
   artificial 24  
   change in animal decline 78–81  
   cultivated 24  
   degraded 24  
   fragmentation 88–9  
   grazing alteration 31  
   human activity impacts 71  
   loss 61–2, 90–1  
   natural 24  
   ruderal 24
- hailstones 228  
   silver-iodide seeding 227
- Hallsands (Devon) 185
- hardpans 111
- hares, island introduction 55
- Hawaiian Ridge, tide gauge records 247
- heather 52  
   burning 116
- heaths  
   loss of montane 237  
   lowland 52–3  
   regeneration 221
- heavy metals 58–9, 216, 218  
   solubility with acid deposition 221
- hedgerow removal 78–9, 114, 115
- Heinrich events 277, 307
- High Asia, deforestation 33
- hills, leveling 161
- Himalayas, deforestation 33
- Holdridge's Life Zones 236
- Holme Fen Post (UK) 169–70
- Holocene 13
- hominids 7, 11, 12, 307
- Homo habilis* 7
- Homo sapiens* 7
- honeybee, Africanized 67, 69
- Hong Kong  
   mass movements 177  
   urban reclamation 162, 163
- Hoover Dam (USA) 122, 125
- 'hot-spots' 92
- Hubbard Brooks (New Hampshire, US) 153, 154
- human agency in environmental change 295
- Human geography* (Brunhes) 5
- human impact, complexity/magnitude 20
- human population  
   cycles 8, 9  
   density 12, 13  
   development 7–11  
   expansion 8, 10  
   global trends 8, 9  
   levels 8  
   twentieth century 18
- human-induced perturbations 303–4
- humans, arrivals 8
- Humber Estuary (England) 256
- Humboldt, Friedrich von 3
- humus  
   forest soils 111  
   loss 110, 114
- hunting 8, 11–12  
   animal impact 81, 82, 84  
   range loss 90

- hurricanes 260–2  
 climate change effects 238, 240  
 coral reef changes 249  
 ENSO phenomenon 261–2  
 frequency 260  
 intensity 260  
 modification 228  
 sea-surface temperatures 260, 261  
 vegetation impact 191
- hybridization 55, 307
- hydrocompaction 169
- hydro-isostasy 170
- hydro-isostatic pressure 194
- hydrologic systems 259–69  
 cold regions 263  
 geomorphology 266–8  
 runoff 262–6  
 weathering 268–9
- hydrologic cycle 243  
 anthropogenic impact 244
- ice 198  
 flow 274  
 loading on crust 248  
 perennial 270  
 removal 228  
 sea 228, 278–9
- Ice Age, human colonization 7
- ice caps 270  
 small 274–7
- ice sheets 243, 270, 271, 272–4  
 grounding line 273  
 sea-level rise 246
- ice shelves 270  
 sea-surface temperatures 273
- ice streams 273
- Icerya purchasi* (cottony-cushion scale) 74
- Imperata* (savanna grass) 37
- inbreeding, island populations 90
- Indus River (Pakistan), sediment load 189, 258
- Indus Valley (Pakistan), irrigated areas 129
- industrial areas  
 climate change 210–11  
 groundwater abstraction 142
- industrial developments, environmental impact 297, 298
- industrial effluents 59
- industrial emissions 203
- industrial fumes 58
- industrialization 18–22
- inertia 302
- infiltration capacity of soils 106, 109, 307
- infrared radiation 199
- 'innovation effect' 84
- insects  
 control by fire 30  
 pattern changes 238
- interbasin water transfers 99–100, 129–30, 131  
 lake water volume reduction 244
- interference, degrees of 24
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) 233, 234  
 drylands 284  
 hurricanes 260–1, 262  
 sea-level rise 245
- introductions  
 accidental 67  
 animals 55  
 extinction 91–2  
 oceanic islands 82  
 plant 53–6
- invasions  
 animals 66–70  
 economic costs 55  
 plant 53–6  
 water loss 136  
 range of species with climate change 238  
 rules 70
- iron  
 salt impact 293–4  
 soil accumulation 103
- Iron Age, sedimentation rate 165
- ironpans 104
- irrigation 16  
 center-pivot 140, 142  
 climate change 207  
 drainage water pollution 145  
 groundwater changes 140  
 weathering 174, 175  
 lake water volume reduction 244  
 precipitation change 207  
 salinity 96–7  
 sea-level rise 245
- irrigation canals 97, 103
- irrigation channels 129
- island biogeography 89–92
- islands  
 barrier 191–2, 257, 258  
*see also* oceanic islands
- isostasy 246, 307
- Italy, southern, landslides 177
- Jamaica, mongoose introduction 74
- Japan, acid rain 223
- Japanese beetle 67, 68
- jetties, coast evolution 186–7, 188, 189
- Jordan River 138
- karstic hollows 163, 307
- keystone species 308  
 savanna 41
- Kilimanjaro, Mount (East Africa) 277
- Kruger National Park (South Africa) 28
- k*-selected species 87–8
- kudzu 54
- Kuk Swamp (Papua New Guinea) 112
- La Niña phases 262
- ladang* system 24
- lake basins 239–40  
 terminal 285
- lake sediments 26
- lakes  
 acid deposition vulnerability 222  
 acidification 148–9, 220–1  
 artificial 55–6  
 climate change 207–8  
 ENSO influences 287  
 expansion with glacier meltwater 277  
 fluctuations 240  
 glacial 277  
 levels 137–8, 139, 140  
 arid lands 292  
 limestone addition 223  
 outburst floods 277  
 thaw 283  
 volume augmentation 138, 140  
 vulnerability 302  
 water volume reduction 244
- land cover 17, 308
- Landes (France), dune reafforestation 183
- Landfill Directive (EU) 300
- landfill sites 164
- landforms 159–60  
 construction 162–4  
 dumping 162–4  
 excavation 160–2
- landscape  
 sensitivity to global warming 234  
 types 24
- landslides 176, 177  
 coastal 256  
 glacier retreat 277  
 precipitation 267
- land-use changes 296  
 albedo differences 205  
 channel form changes 181
- land-use practices, desertification 47
- Larea divaricata* (creosote bush) 30, 49
- laterite 308
- lateritization 103
- lava flows, control 195
- lavaka* 173
- Laysan atoll (Hawaii) 55
- lead  
 poisoning 78  
 pollution 215, 217–18, 219
- legislation, wildlife protection 300
- leisure activities, animal decline 81
- Lessepsian migration 70
- levees 125, 127, 308  
 Mississippi River 190
- lichens  
 air pollution 57–8  
 desert 45  
 reindeer 69
- Life Zones of Holdridge 236
- lightning  
 fires 26, 238  
 suppression 227–8
- lime/limestone  
 addition to clay soils 107  
 addition to lakes 223  
 overburden 168
- limestone pavement removal 161
- Little Ice Age 173  
 glacier retreat 275, 276  
 peat bog loss 174  
 solar activity 196
- Loe Pool (Cornwall) 165, 166
- logarithmic-logistic view of population trends 8, 9
- London (UK)  
 aquifer 140, 141  
 groundwater level 142, 143  
 thunderstorms 211, 212
- longevity 88
- longshore drift 188
- Los Angeles (California)  
 air pollution 218  
 photochemical smog 217  
 pollutant reduction 215
- Louisiana (USA), barrier islands 257
- Lyell, Charles 4
- MacMillan Dam (Pecos River, New Mexico) 168
- Madagascar, *lavaka* 173
- magnification, pesticides 75, 76
- mammals, introductions to Britain 74
- Man and nature* (Perkins) 4
- Man and the earth* (Shaler) 5
- mangrove swamps 37–8  
 hurricanes 262  
 industrial effluents 59  
 sea-level rise 253–4

- species composition 253–4  
temperature sensitivity 239
- Maoris 26, 27  
fire use 25
- maquis 308  
Mediterranean basin 48
- marl pits 104, 160  
infilled 164
- Marsh, George Perkins 4–5
- mass balance 308  
modeling 278
- mass movements 308  
accelerated 175–7  
hydrologic conditions 267  
rainfall intensity 260
- Maunder Minimum 196
- Mayan civilization 166, 167
- Mead, Lake (USA) 122–3
- meanders, elimination 178
- medieval cycle 8, 9
- Mediterranean basin 48  
aggradation phases 172–3  
cut-and-fill episodes 173  
erosion phases 172–3  
Suez Canal 70
- megafauna, extinction 85
- meltwater, surface 274
- Mesolithic 16  
colonization 50  
sedimentation rate 165  
temperate forest removal 32
- mesquite 30, 31
- metals  
pollution 145, 216  
smelting 17
- metapedogenesis 95
- methane 200, 201, 202  
atmospheric concentration 233  
sources/sinks 203
- microclimate management 229
- migration 8  
climate change 85  
fish 155
- Milankovitch Theory of climatic change 197
- milpa* system 24
- Minapin Glacier (Karakoram Mts, Pakistan) 275
- mine drainage waters 150
- mineral extraction 71, 161, 162
- mining/mining industry 17–18  
hydraulic 164–5  
pollution 149–50  
sediments causing channel aggradation 183  
seismic activity 194–5  
subsidence 168–9  
waste dumping 162  
mass movements 176–7
- Mississippi River (USA) 123, 126  
channel cutoff program 178  
channelization 190  
delta 191  
loss 252  
levees 190
- Missouri River (USA) 123, 126
- mist trapping by forests 207
- modernization cycle 8, 9
- Mohenjo-Daro (Pakistan) 174, 175
- mongoose introduction to Jamaica 74
- monsoon  
Bangladesh 266  
rainfall 260
- Montreal Protocol (1987) 226, 233
- mounds, created 162
- mountains, global warming impacts 234
- mulches 229
- Myxoma* virus 72
- Nakuru, Lake (Kenya), biodiversity 71
- Narmada River (India) 122
- natural ecosystem stability 302
- natural oscillations 303–4
- naturalists 61
- Nature Conservancy 300
- navigation, river channel modification 178
- Neolithic 16, 17  
colonization 50  
elm decline 50–1  
sedimentation rate 165  
temperate forest removal 32
- New World, agriculture 15–16
- New York (USA), sediment load of rivers 163
- New Zealand  
fire use 25  
mammal introductions 55  
soil erosion 112–13  
vegetation 25, 26
- niche location 88
- Nile, River  
delta 294  
impact of Aswan Dam 188–9, 255, 257  
recession 255  
sea-level rise 293  
sediment flow 123–4, 127, 257
- nitrate 101–2, 144–5  
drainage 148  
hazard 146  
river levels 146–7  
tillage patterns 148
- nitrogen 146
- nitrogen cycle, grazing 30
- nitrogen dioxide 217
- nitrogen oxides, emissions 224
- nitrous oxide 200, 201, 202  
atmospheric concentration 233  
sources/sinks 203
- nivation 272
- nomadic societies, land-use practices 47
- nonindustrial civilizations 295–6
- Norfolk Broads (UK) 160
- North America  
deforestation 33, 34  
fires 25  
prairies 48–50  
salinity 98  
sand dune reactivation 289, 291
- North Atlantic Oscillation 286–7  
dust storms 288
- North Platte River (USA) 179–80
- North Sea, phosphate concentrations 156
- Norway, aluminium smelters 58
- no-tillage cultivation 107
- nuclear exchange 204
- nuclear reactors 20
- nutrient cycling, steady-state 153
- nutrients, deforestation 152
- occupation mounds 162
- ocean floors, waste disposal 163
- oceanic islands  
animal decline 81–2  
plant invasions 54, 55
- oil fields  
abstraction causing subsidence 168  
environmental impact 297, 298  
seismicity 193
- oil pollution 76, 77  
marine 157–8
- oil shales 161
- oil spills 59
- oil wells, burning 204
- Okavango Swamps (Botswana) 80, 128
- Old World, agriculture 15–16
- open-pit mines 161
- Opuntia* (prickly pear) 62
- Orbital Theory of climatic change 197
- ore mining 17
- organic pollutants, synthetic/industrial 145–6  
marine predators 157
- organic wastes 148
- Oryctolagus cuniculus* (European rabbit) 71
- overfishing 82
- overgrazing 30–1  
savanna deterioration 41
- Owens Lake (California)  
desiccation 99–100, 292  
level decline 244
- oxygen, water content with thermal pollution 155
- ozone 56–7  
depletion 11  
formation 217  
hole in stratosphere 224  
photochemical pollution 217, 218  
stratospheric depletion 223–6, 227  
tropospheric 201
- Pacific northwest (USA) 266
- paddy soil 104
- Paleolithic Age 11
- Pampa grasslands (Argentina) 49  
alien species 54
- parasites, control by fire 30
- pasque flower 61–2
- Passer domesticus* (house sparrow) 73
- pastoralism 12, 13–18, 30  
environmental problems 296
- pastoralists, fire use 24
- pastures  
drainage of upland 113  
wild 30
- pathogens, pattern changes 238
- PCBs 146  
Great Lakes levels 151
- peat  
cutting 160  
drainage 108, 113  
afforestation 137  
hags 171–4
- peat bogs 104  
eroding 173–4  
erosion stages 174  
water availability 263
- per capita consumption 20
- permafrost 28, 167, 239, 270–2, 308  
active layer 271  
boundary displacement 280, 281  
coastal erosion 234, 282  
degradation 245, 279–82  
distribution 272  
melting 243  
regions 279–80, 281, 282–3  
sediment cliffs 256  
sporadic 272  
warming 279–80
- peroxyacyl nitrates 217
- pesticides 20  
magnification effects 75, 76  
pollution 75, 145, 148



- pests, introduced 62  
 Peten region lakes (Guatemala), lake sedimentation 166–7  
 petrol, unleaded 215, 219  
*Pseudotsuga taxifolia* (Douglas fir) 235  
 phosphates 145  
 phosphorus 146  
   Great Lakes levels 151  
 photochemical reactions 56–7, 308  
 photochemical smog 58  
 phytoplankton 151  
   blooms 156–7  
   ultraviolet radiation sensitivity 223  
 piers 185–6, 187  
 piezometric surface 140, 308  
 pigs  
   island introduction 55  
   waste spills 148  
 pine  
   aluminium smelter impact 58  
   Jack 30  
   ponderosa 58  
 pingos, ice-covered 283  
*Pinus*, sand dune stabilization 184–5  
*Pinus banksiana* (Jack pine) 30  
*Pinus ponderosa* (ponderosa pine) 58  
 Plaggen soils 104  
 plankton  
   dimethylsulfide production 204  
   nutrients from dust storms 288  
 plant collectors 61  
 plant pathogens 54  
 plants  
   aquatic 146  
   breeding 63  
   dispersal 54  
   domestication 14–15, 53  
   explosions 53–6  
   introductions 53–6  
   invasion 53–6  
   salination effects on growth 101  
   salt-accumulating 102  
 playa sediments 286  
 Pleistocene 13  
 plow development 15–16  
 plow sole 106  
 plowing 17  
   contour-strip 119  
   environmental problems 296  
   grasslands 16–17  
   ridge and furrow pattern 107  
   soil structure 106–7  
   steep slopes 114  
   strip lynchets 159, 160  
   water movement patterns 148  
   wind erosion prevention 119  
 podzolization 103–5, 308  
 political action 300  
 pollen  
   post-glacial vegetation change 50  
   sequences 32  
 pollution 74–8  
   animal feedlots 148  
   chemical by agriculture 146–52  
   coal burning 212  
   coral reefs 77–8  
   developing countries 216  
   incidents 300  
   lead 215, 217–18, 219  
   marine 156–8  
   mining 149–50  
   peat bog loss 174  
   pesticides 75, 145, 148  
   sequence of changes 21  
   suspended sediments 155–6  
   thermal 155  
   urban 211–13, 214, 215–17  
     heat-island effect 211  
   vehicle emissions 212  
   see also air pollution; water pollution  
 polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) 146, 216  
 Polynesians 26  
   fire use 25  
*Popillia japonica* (Japanese beetle) 67, 68  
 population, intrinsic rate of increase 88  
 poultry operations, waste spills 148  
 poverty 10  
 power output 20–1  
 prairies 48–50  
 precipitation  
   dust storms 288  
   geomorphology 239  
   landslides 267  
   runoff 262, 263  
   sensitivity 290–1  
   UK 263–4  
 pre-industrial civilizations 295–6  
 prickly pear 62  
 primary cycle 8, 9  
 primary production, net 39  
*Principles of geology* (Lyell) 4  
*Prosopis juliflora* (mesquite) 30  
 protection legislation 300  
*Pteridium aquilinum* (bracken) 31, 56  
*Pueraria montana* (kudzu) 54  
*Pulsatilla vulgaris* (pasque flower) 61–2  
 quarries 161  
 Quelccaya ice cap (Peru) 277  
 rabbits  
   European 71–2  
   island introduction 55  
 radiative forcing 201, 308  
 rafts 16  
 ragwort, Oxford 56  
 rails, flightless 81–2  
 railways, plant invasions 56  
 rain forests  
   area reduction 91  
   clearance for agriculture 33  
   deforestation 34–5, 36, 37, 38  
   equatorial 33  
   fragmentation 91  
   loss 34  
   removal and climate change 205–6  
   resources 35, 37  
   secondary 38–9  
   susceptibility to man-made perturbation 302  
 rainfall 290–1  
   ENSO phenomenon 262  
   intensity 260  
   monsoon 260  
   runoff 290–1  
   soil erosion 260, 267–8  
 rainmaking experiments 226–7  
 range loss 90–1  
 rarity 88  
 'Raubwirtschaft' 5  
 reafforestation  
   sand dunes 183, 184–5  
   soil carbon 105  
   soil structure 106  
 reclamation techniques, salinization 102–3  
 Reclus E 5  
 recolonization 300  
 recombinant DNA technology 63  
 recreation 297  
 Red Sea, Suez Canal 70  
 red tides 156–7  
 reindeer, introduced 69  
 reservoirs 121–5, 126, 127  
   climate change 207–8  
   creation 181  
   hydro-isostatic pressure 194  
   pollution 113  
   sedimentation 122–4, 167  
   seismicity 194, 195  
   stream temperatures 155  
   tank landscape 125, 127  
   water impoundment 244  
 resilience 302  
 resources, exploitation 5  
 revegetation 98, 117  
 rhexistatie 242  
 Rhine, River (Europe) 265  
 Rhône, River (France), sediment load 189, 258  
 ringed plover, little 71  
 river(s)  
   acid deposition vulnerability 222  
   Arctic 263  
   bank caving 179  
   channelization 127–30  
   channels 291–2  
     straightening 178–9  
   discharge changes 266–8  
   dredging 130–1  
   forest type substitution 134–5  
   meander elimination 178  
   modification 121–5, 126, 127–31  
   nitrate levels 146–7  
   nondeliberate changes 178–83  
   peak flood flows 179  
   salt marshes 251–2  
   sediment load 123  
     deposition on coast 188  
   sediment starvation 257–8  
   system changes 259–60  
   tidal 256  
   turbidity 179  
   urbanization effects 131–3  
   vegetation modification 133–7  
 river basin, urbanization 179  
 riverbank vegetation 128, 136, 181–2  
 riverbed  
   degradation 178, 179  
   marsh draining 292  
 roads  
   animal decline 81  
   erosion prevention 118  
   forest 113  
   plant spread 56  
   salting 150  
 roadsides, plant invasions 56  
 robber economy concept 5  
 rock(s)  
   acid drainage 150  
   direct solution 168  
   disruption 293  
   weathering 268–9, 272  
 rock salt 150  
   extraction 168–9  
 rodents 72  
*r*-selected species 87–8  
 runoff 262–6, 290–1  
   contaminants 150–1  
   control 118

- deforestation 245
  - Europe 264–5
  - sea-level rise 244
  - UK 263–4
- rural–urban area temperature boundary 209
- Rybinsk reservoir (CIS) 208
- sabkhas* (Arabian Gulf) 254, 292–3
- Sahara 47–8
  - Holocene pluvial lakes 286
- Sahel
  - climatic fluctuations 286–7
  - drought 45–6, 203, 292
- Saiga tatarica* (saiga antelope) 74
- St Louis (USA), thunderstorms 211
- salinity
  - biotic treatment 103
  - coastal zone 100–1
  - consequences 101–2
  - control 103
  - conversion 102–3
  - deforestation 152
  - dryland 98–9
  - eradication 102
  - groundwater use 140
  - human agency 95–101
  - irrigation 96–7, 295–6
  - natural sources 95
  - urban 99
  - Valencia Lake 137
- salt
  - crystal growth 293
  - de-icing 150
  - extraction 168–9
  - hydration 293
  - see also* rock salt
- salt cedar 136
- salt marsh 251–3
  - accretion 192–3
  - industrial effluents 59
  - landward migration 251
  - mid-lagoon 252
  - sediments 251–2
- salt ‘scalds’ 98
- salt weathering 293–4
- salt-affected lands, reclamation 102–3
- Salvinia molesta* (aquatic fern) 62
- San Joaquin Valley (California) 115–16
- sand dunes 239, 289, 290
  - degradation 191
  - drifting 183–4
  - encroachment 289
  - fluctuations 285–6
  - mobility 289, 291
  - mobilization 286
  - reactivation 183–5, 287, 289
  - stabilization 183–5
    - negative effects 191–2
- sand fences 185, 191–2
- sandy beaches 256–7
- sandy heath soils, clay addition 107
- sanitization, fire use 30
- Saudi Arabia, groundwater 140–2
- Sauer CO 5, 24
  - fire suppression 28
- de Saussure 3
- savanna 39–42, 308
  - biomass burning 203
  - derived 37
  - fire 40–1
  - fire-resistant trees 40
  - natural 41
  - rangeland deterioration 41
- scarification 29
- Sciurus vulgaris* (squirrel) 73
- Scolt Head Island (Norfolk) 253
- sea, eutrophication 157
- seafloor contraction 247
- sea-ice 228, 278–9
  - albedo feedback 279
- sea-level rise 100–1, 243
  - by 2100 246, 247
  - anthropogenic contribution 244–5
  - arid-zone coastlines 292–3
  - cliffs 256
  - coastal systems 244–9
  - coral reefs 250–1
  - deltas 254–5
  - estuaries 255–6
  - mangrove swamp impact 253–4
  - rate 249
  - salt marsh impact 251–3
  - sandy beaches 256–7
  - thermal expansion 243
  - wave refraction patterns 252–3
- seamounts 247
- sea-surface temperatures (SSTs) 249–50
  - hurricanes 260, 261
  - ice shelves 273
- seawater
  - pH 251
  - thermal expansion 243
- sediment(s)
  - allochthonous 253
  - autochthonous 253
  - lake 26
  - mangrove swamps 253
  - salt marsh 251–2
  - starvation 257–8
  - suspended 155–6
  - yield with deforestation 113
- sedimentation
  - accelerated 164–7, 181–2
  - coral reef damage 77, 78
  - deltas 100–1, 254
  - rates 112
  - reservoirs 122–4, 167
  - soil erosion 111
  - valley 165
- seedbeds 29
- seeding of grasslands 16–17
- seeds
  - germination 29
  - release 30
- Seeswood Pool (Warwickshire), sedimentation rate 165, 166
- seismicity 193–5
- semi-arid environment, runoff 291
- Senecio squalidus* (Oxford ragwort) 56
- sewage
  - coral reef stress 77
  - discharge 156, 157
  - untreated 151, 152
- shade 229
- Shaler NS 5
- Shanghai (China), subsidence 168
- shear stress 176
- sheep, domestication 66
- shelterbelts 228–9
- shelters 11
- shifting agriculture 36–7
  - fire use 24, 109
- shingle extraction 185
- shoaling 165
- shoreline retreat 256–7
- shrubs
  - dominance 31
  - encroachment on savanna 41
  - post-cultural formations 48
- Sierra Nevada (California), hydraulic mining 164–5
- Sinai–Negev region (Middle East) 205
- sink hole 167, 168
- sky-view factor 209, 210
- slash-and-burn activities 37
  - fire use 109
- sledge-runners 16
- slope
  - instability 176
  - runoff control 118
- slope failure
  - glacier recession 282
  - permafrost degradation 280, 282
- smog 213
  - photochemical 212, 216–17
- smoke
  - coal combustion 215
  - industrial emissions 203
  - palls from oil burning 204
- snow 198, 272
  - global warming 279
  - permafrost impact 279
  - seasonal 270
- snowfall in Europe 265
- snowmelt peak 265
- sodium carbonate 101
  - hydration 293
- sodium chloride 293
- sodium ions, soil structure 101
- sodium sulfate 174
  - hydration 293
- soil(s) 94–5
  - acid rain impact 221
  - acid sulfate 104–5
  - acidification 103–5
  - carbon 105
  - climate 95, 108
  - compaction 60–1, 105–6, 111
  - conservation 110, 117–20, 156
    - channel form changes 181
  - critical loads 105
  - crusting 111
  - drainage 107–8
  - fertilization 109
  - fire impact 109
  - forest 111–12
  - humus loss 110
  - infiltration capacity 106, 109
  - ion exchange 105
  - lateritization 103
  - moisture 108
  - organic matter loss 114
  - organisms 95
  - parent material 94
  - podzolization 103–5
  - productivity 111
  - quality 108
  - salinity 95–103, 295–6
  - salinization 140
  - sandy heath 107
  - savanna development 40
  - structure
    - alteration 105–7
    - with salinity 101
  - surface reflection increase 228
  - tilling impact on runoff 136
  - time 95
  - topography 94

- soil(s) (*cont'd*)  
 tropical 103  
 water repellancy 109  
 water runoff 107  
*see also* clay soils; peat
- soil erosion 16, 110–20  
 agriculture 296  
 construction work 117  
 economic cost 111  
 fire 116–17  
 land use change 112–13  
 rainfall intensity 260, 267–8  
 rates 112  
 sedimentation 111  
 stream turbidity 78  
 urbanization 117  
 uses 120  
 water-induced 113–14  
 wind-induced 287–8
- soil fauna 106
- solar activity cycles 196
- solar radiation 198, 199  
 absorption by city surfaces 208–9
- Somerville, Mary 4
- South Platte River (USA) 179–80
- South Saskatchewan River (Canada) 123, 124
- Soviet Union, dust storms 116
- sparrow, house 73
- Spartina* (cord-grass) 192–3  
 swards 252
- specialization, degree of 88
- species diversity, change 62–4
- speech 12
- Sphagnum* catchment 137
- Sphagnum* moss, loss from peat bogs 174
- splash erosion 111
- spruce, black 28
- squirrel 73
- stability 301–2
- steppe 85
- steric effect 243, 308
- Stone Age 11
- storms, violent 238
- storm-water runoff, contaminants 150–1
- stream(s)  
 bank erosion 117  
 downcutting 172–3  
 thermal pollution 155
- stream flow  
 clear-felling 134, 135  
 forest type substitution 134–5  
 reforestation 137
- stress–response sequences 241
- strip lynchets 159, 160
- strip mines 161
- subsidence *see* ground subsidence
- succession 308  
 Clements' theory 301  
 vegetation 28, 29
- successional stages 28
- Sudbury (Canada) 58
- Sudd (Sudan) 128
- Suez Canal 70
- sugar beet cultivation 115
- sulfates  
 aerosols 204  
 concrete damage 294  
 precipitation 221  
 sources of emissions 222–3
- sulfur dioxide 57–8  
 acid deposition 219–20, 222–3  
 developing countries 216
- emissions 224  
 forest decline 60  
 fossil fuel combustion 204, 213, 215  
 weathering 174
- sulfur emissions 224
- sulfur oxides 219–20
- sulfur scrubbers 223
- sulfuric acid 174
- sunlight, photochemical smogs 217
- sunspots 196, 308
- Surell 3
- surface depression 167
- surface-water chemistry 148
- survival rate, adult 88
- suspended particulate matter (SPM),  
 developing countries 216
- Susquehanna River (eastern USA) 265
- sustainable urban drainage systems (SUDS)  
 133, 135
- Swansea Valley (Wales) 58
- swidden agriculture 36–7
- synanthropes 72–3, 308
- Tamarix pentandra* (salt cedar) 136
- tank landscape (southeast India) 125, 127
- technology 9–10  
 growth 9
- tectonic forces 193
- tectonic uplift 246
- temperature  
 dust storms 288  
 geomorphology 239  
 global 201, 203  
 nuclear exchange 204  
 surface 233  
*see also* sea-surface temperatures (SSTs)
- terraces 118–19
- Texas (USA), sediment load of rivers 189, 190, 258
- thawing rates 280
- Themeda australis* (kangaroo grass) 31
- Themeda triandra* (African grass) 30
- thermal erosion 283
- thermokarst depression 167, 170, 308  
 permafrost degradation 282
- Three Gorges Dam (China) 123
- thunderstorms, urban areas 211, 212
- tillage patterns, nitrates 148
- Tokyo (Japan), subsidence 168
- tools  
 pebble 11  
 stone 12
- topsoil erosion in overgrazed savanna  
 41
- tornadoes 238
- tourism 297
- towns 13
- trampling 30  
 soil structure 106  
 vegetation effects 32
- travertine *see* tufa
- tree line 235
- trees  
 carbon dioxide impact on growth 238  
 conifer plantations 80  
 fire-resistant 40  
 rings 26  
 root disturbance 60–1  
 sand dune stabilization 183, 184–5  
 seedlings 235
- trophic status 88, 308
- trout distribution 67
- tufa, decline 175
- tundra 11, 308  
 arctic–alpine loss 236  
 boreal forest expansion 236  
 subsidence 170
- turbary 160
- turbidity 308  
 stream 78
- turboclaire system 228
- turbulence, city buildings 211
- Turdus merula* (blackbird) 72–3
- Ulmus* (elm) 50
- ultraviolet light radiation 223
- urban agglomerations 18
- urban civilizations 18–22
- urban heat island 208  
 intensity 209–10  
 pollution 211
- urban revolution 13
- urban salinity 99
- urbanization  
 biodiversity 70–1  
 climate change 208–11  
 flood runoff 131–2, 135  
 flooding impact 131–3  
 groundwater 99  
 pollution 211–13, 214, 215–17  
 river basin 179  
 sea-level rise 244  
 soil erosion 117  
 storm-water runoff 150–1, 244  
 thermal pollution of streams 155
- USA  
 Dust Bowl 111, 115, 288  
 forest increase 38  
 sand dune reactivation 289  
 vegetation type shift predictions 237, 238
- Vaiont Dam (Italy)  
 disaster 177  
 seismicity 195
- Valencia, Lake (Venezuela) 3  
 basin 137
- valley sedimentation 165
- vegetation  
 agents of change 237–8  
 albedo change 204–6  
 anthropogenic modification 191  
 bank 128, 136, 181–2  
 buffer zone 152  
 change 23  
 classification of human influence 24  
 death with salinity 101  
 fire effects 24–30  
 grazing 30–2  
 latitudinal changes 235  
 modification effects on rivers 133–7  
 permafrost impact 279  
 post-glacial migration rates 235  
 regeneration with stream flow 134  
 removal and climate change 206  
 riverbank 128, 136, 181–2  
 stripping 116  
 succession 28, 29  
 vegetation zones, altitudinal changes 235
- vehicle emissions  
 controls 217  
 pollution 212
- Venezuela, savanna 40
- Victoria Falls (central Africa) 265
- Vikings, sedimentation rate 165
- Virgin Lands project (Soviet Union) 116
- volcanic dust veils 197, 203

- volcanic material loading 247  
 volcanoes 193–5  
 Volga Basin 137–8  
  
*Waldschäden* 59  
*Waldsterben* 59  
 Wallace's line 66, 308  
 Washington, Lake (Seattle, US) 151, 152  
 waste disposal, coastal cities 163  
 water 121  
   erosion 47  
   interbasin transfers 99–100  
   loss 121, **122**  
 water buffalo, Australian introduction  
   67–8  
 water diversion schemes, climate change  
   207  
 Water Framework Directive (EU) 300  
 water pollution 143–6  
   diffuse sources 144  
   plankton production 204  
   point sources 144  
 water quality with deforestation 152–4  
 water runoff 110–11  
  
 water table  
   mining subsidence 168  
   rising 98  
 water vapor 198  
 waterlogging 96–7  
 wave refraction patterns 252–3  
 weathering 268–9, 272  
   accelerated 174–5  
   chemical 293–4  
 weeds, introduced 54  
 weevil, black long-snouted 62  
 West Antarctic Ice Sheet (WAIS) 246, 273–4  
 West Bay (Dorset), coast evolution 186–7, 189  
 wetlands 308  
   degradation 254  
   drainage 108, 245  
   industrial effluents 59  
   loss 80, 254  
   reclamation 245  
   species diversity 92  
 whale populations 83  
 whaling 82–3  
 wheat cultivation in USA 115  
 wheeled carts 16  
  
 Whitaker JR 5  
 white powders 228  
 wild animals 78  
 wildlife protection legislation 300  
 wind(s)  
   catastrophic 238  
   city impact 211  
   fire severity 238  
   sand-moving power 289  
 wind erosion 119  
   soils 287–8  
   suppression 118  
 windbreaks 119, 228–9  
 wirescapes 81  
 wolf, population density 90  
 woodcutting, desertification 44, 45  
 woody species encroachment 30–1  
  
 Yellowstone National Park (USA), fire  
   suppression 28, 29  
 Yorkshire Moors (England), heather burning  
   116  
  
 Zambezi River (central Africa) 265





