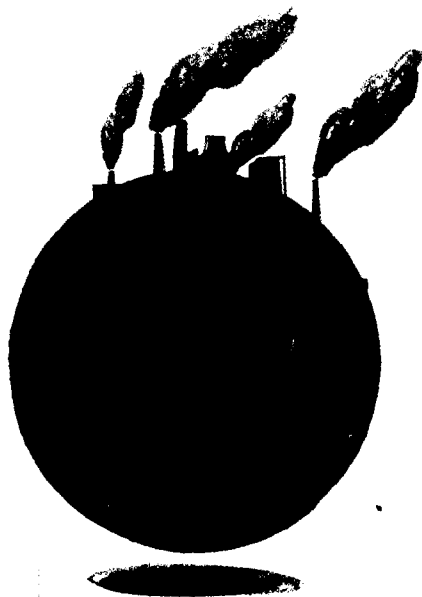


# Why our economy is killing the planet and what we can do about it



THE graphs climbing across these pages are a stark reminder of the crisis facing our planet. Consumption of resources is rising rapidly, biodiversity is plummeting and just about every measure shows humans affecting Earth on a vast scale. Most of us accept the need for a more sustainable way to live, by reducing carbon emissions, developing renewable technology and increasing energy efficiency.

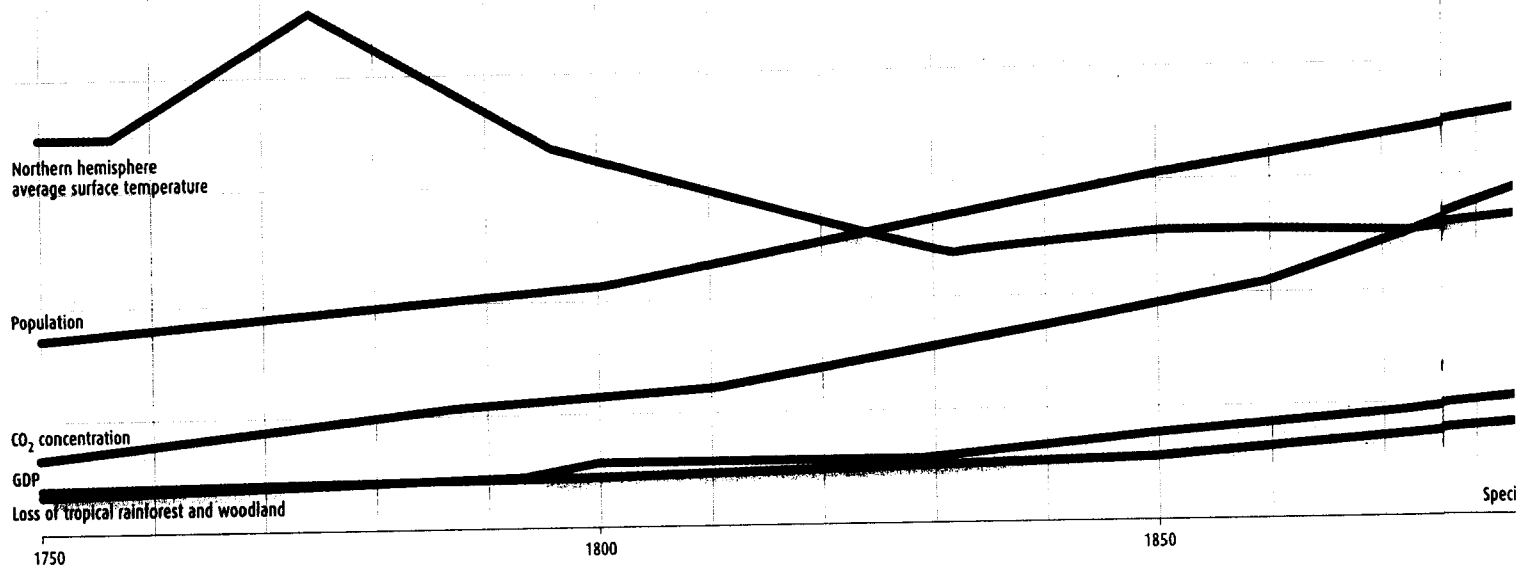
But are these efforts to save the planet doomed? A growing band of experts are looking at figures like these and arguing that personal carbon virtue and collective environmentalism are futile as long as our economic system is built on the assumption of growth. The science tells us that if we are serious about saving Earth, we must reshape our economy.

This, of course, is economic heresy. Growth to most economists is as essential as the air we breathe: it is, they claim, the only force capable of lifting the poor out of poverty, feeding the

world's growing population, meeting the costs of rising public spending and stimulating technological development – not to mention funding increasingly expensive lifestyles. They see no limits to that growth, ever.

In recent weeks it has become clear just how terrified governments are of anything that threatens growth, as they pour billions of public money into a failing financial system. Amid the confusion, any challenge to the growth dogma needs to be looked at very carefully. This one is built on a long-standing question: how do we square Earth's finite resources with the fact that as the economy grows, the amount of natural resources needed to sustain that activity must grow too? It has taken all of human history for the economy to reach its current size. On current form it will take just two decades to double.

In this special issue, *New Scientist* brings together key thinkers from politics, economics



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and philosophy who profoundly disagree with the growth dogma but agree with the scientists monitoring our fragile biosphere. The father of ecological economics, Herman Daly, explains why our economy is blind to the environmental costs of growth (page 46), while Tim Jackson, adviser to the UK government on sustainable development, crunches numbers to show that technological fixes won't compensate for the hair-raising speed at which the economy is expanding (page 42).

Gus Speth, one-time environment adviser to President Jimmy Carter, explains why after four decades working at the highest levels of US policy-making he believes green values have no chance against today's capitalism (page 48), followed by Susan George, a leading thinker of the political left, who argues that only a global government-led effort can shift the destructive course we are on (page 50).

For Andrew Simms, policy director of the London-based New Economics Foundation, it is crucial to demolish one of the main justifications for unbridled growth: that it can pull the poor out of poverty (page 49). And the broadcaster and activist David Suzuki explains how he inspires business leaders and politicians to change their thinking (page 44).

Just what a truly sustainable economy would look like is explored on page 52, when *New Scientist* uses Daly's blueprint to imagine life in a society that doesn't use up resources faster than the world can replace them. Expect tough decisions on wealth, tax, jobs and birth rates. But as Daly says, shifting from growth to development doesn't have to mean freezing in the dark under communist tyranny.

Technological innovation would

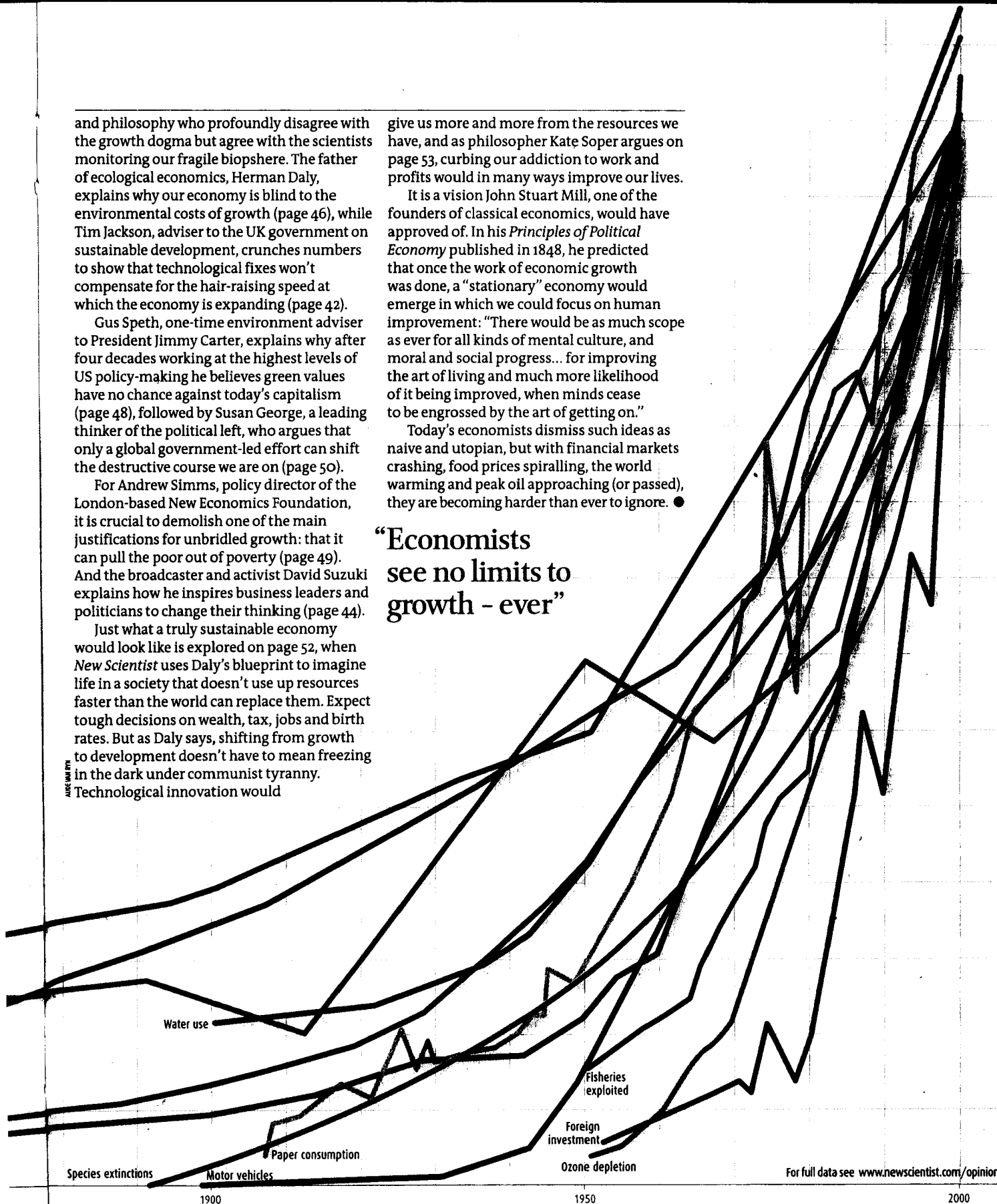
give us more and more from the resources we have, and as philosopher Kate Soper argues on page 53, curbing our addiction to work and profits would in many ways improve our lives.

It is a vision John Stuart Mill, one of the founders of classical economics, would have approved of. In his *Principles of Political Economy* published in 1848, he predicted that once the work of economic growth was done, a "stationary" economy would emerge in which we could focus on human improvement: "There would be as much scope as ever for all kinds of mental culture, and moral and social progress... for improving the art of living and much more likelihood of it being improved, when minds cease to be engrossed by the art of getting on."

Today's economists dismiss such ideas as naive and utopian, but with financial markets crashing, food prices spiralling, the world warming and peak oil approaching (or passed), they are becoming harder than ever to ignore. ●

## "Economists see no limits to growth - ever"

ANDEW SIMMS



For full data see [www.newscientist.com/opinion](http://www.newscientist.com/opinion)