

# What is happening to our common home?

## Pollution, waste, and the throwaway culture

**17** Instead of beginning with theology or philosophy, I want to sketch a picture of what is happening on our common home, the earth.

**[18]** Our lives seem to be speeding up. We might call the phenomenon of everything moving along so fast by the term “rapidification.” Human change is happening faster than the slower speed of biological evolution. And much of the change is not aimed at human dignity or ecological sustainability. **[19]** The human family has just come through a period when we believed that we could do anything on earth, without regard to sustainability. But a growing number of people now see the need to protect nature. Let us take a brief look at the main questions about the environment that are before us. We can’t sweep these under the carpet any longer.

**20** Pollution is part of daily life for many people. Breathing in pollutants causes a host of health issues, especially among the poor who cannot escape it. Technology cannot solve this problem.

**21** Toxic waste is a culprit in the pollution puzzle. We pile it everywhere, but it’s making the earth, which is our home, into an “immense pile of filth”. Once beautiful landscapes are now littered with rubbish.

**22** We live in a “throwaway culture” in which we think nothing of using

a carton or other item once and then disposing of it. Paper, which is easily recycled, is often used once, for example. The dialogue to which I’m calling us as a human family could deal with this by creating a circular model of production in which everything is used and reused, we engage in moderate consumption, and we guard the non-renewable resources.

### For reflection and discussion:

How has pollution affected me and my family?

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What does the pope mean by a “throwaway culture”?

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What steps am I taking to reduce and recycle in my home or workplace?



# Climate as a common good

**23** The climate belongs to everyone and is a complex system linked to what is needed to sustain human life. A “solid scientific consensus” has emerged that human activity has contributed significantly to the general warming of the planet. Other factors also play into this, such as volcanic activity and the solar cycle, but it is now undeniable that our dependence on fossil fuels triggers a large increase in greenhouse gases. Fossil fuels are at the center of the worldwide energy system.

**24** Climate change affects the carbon cycle, essential to all life – potable water supplies decrease; agricultural output is reduced; water levels rise on our coasts; polar ice caps melt, increasing the production of methane gas.

**25** The poor will be affected by these climate changes more than the rich. Nearly two-thirds of all people on earth live along the coastlines. These changes adversely affect farming, fishing, and forestry, the means of livelihood of most poor people on earth. The poor are forced to follow the migrations of animals and move away as deserts expand. They must leave behind their homes and live with even greater insecurity. How can we be indifferent to them?

**26** The ones on earth with power and money, however, try to deny there is a problem at all. They argue with the scientific consensus on this while ignoring the plight of the suffering masses. We need an urgent plan to drastically reduce polluting gases and increase access to renewable energy.

## For reflection and discussion:

Where does my electricity come from?  
What choices do I have in switching to green energy or reducing my consumption?

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What can I do to influence government in their decision making on investing in fossil fuels versus renewable energy?

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What is the evidence that climate change is happening and is caused by human activity?

## Did you know?

Australia is heavily dependent on fossil fuels – around 75 per cent of our electricity is produced using coal from power plants such as Hazelwood (pictured below) in the La Trobe Valley in Victoria.

Australia is blessed with an abundance of clean energy from sun, wind and thermal sources. In 2001, the Renewable Energy Target scheme was introduced to ensure that 20 per cent of our energy comes from these renewable sources by 2020. The future of this scheme however remains uncertain.

At the same time, Australian tax payers are still heavily subsidizing the fossil fuel-friendly tax breaks for big polluters.

These are big questions we face as a nation – questions that affect both our environmental and economic stability into the future.



# The issue of water and loss of biodiversity



**27** In wealthy nations, the habit of wasting and discarding resources is astounding! We simply must address this, in part for the sake of the poor. **[28]** Fresh and available water is primary. It is essential for human life. Our supplies of water, once abundant, are running low and in some places “water poverty” has already appeared.

**29** Unsafe water is the only water widely available in poor nations. It is the cause of numerous diseases and much death. It results in poor production among farmers. Meanwhile, we continue to pollute the water supplies.

**30** In some places, the sale of water has become a thriving business, but the poor cannot afford to pay. We must agree that access to safe drinking water is a basic human right. We have a “social debt” to the poor and must provide water, but few understand the seriousness of this crisis.

**31** Water and its management is so important that the scarcity that is emerging, and the controls on it being imposed by multinational business, could lead to war.

**32** The plundering of earth’s resources happens because developers are short-sighted. The loss of woodlands and waterways reduces biodiversity. Species are being lost at an alarming rate. **[33]** We can’t think of the loss of these species with indifference. We do not have the right to destroy them.

**34** Not only are we losing large animals and birds, but also the smaller micro species that live in the ground, wetlands, and trees. As we attempt to solve the problems we have created through industry and commerce, we often create an even larger problem in the process. The level of intervention to solve this, often in the service of business interests, is making the earth less rich and beautiful.

**35** We crowd out many species and ruin their habitat by building highways, damming water sources, and tearing down forests. As a human family, we must pay close attention to these losses because they are an essential part of the balance of life on earth.

**36** Those looking to turn a fast profit often don’t care about ecosystems. We are often complicit in this without knowing as we buy homes or products that result from this.

**37** We applaud efforts to provide sanctuaries and protect biodiversity, and we know that certain areas and species need more protection than others.

**38** Two examples include the great aquifers and glaciers on the planet and the Amazon and Congo River basins, which are the world’s “lungs” and are essential for all life on earth; we must protect them. **[39]** Managing forests and wetlands demands careful study and good planning.

**40** The oceans are of immense importance to human life but, like other natural environments, are terribly threatened. **[41]** The coral reefs are particularly threatened by agricultural runoff, the warming of sea waters, and industrial waste being dumped at sea. **[42]** In summary, we need a careful inventory of the species of the earth and a plan to safeguard and care for each. We are all interconnected.

## For reflection and discussion:

Australia’s Great Barrier Reef is a World Heritage site, one of the most spectacularly beautiful and fragile environments on earth. However, the Reef is in serious danger of being damaged by human intervention. As ports operate or are planned to be built opposite the Reef, silt empties out to sea and ocean pollution degrades the water quality. What can we do to help ensure it’s protected for future generations?

“...the deterioration of the environment  
and of society affects the most vulnerable  
people on the planet...”(48)



## Decline in the quality of human life and the breakdown of society

**43** We humans also belong to the natural order of the world, and we have rights to life, dignity, and happiness.

**44** But many urban areas have become overcrowded and dangerous. They waste a lot of energy and water.

**45** Some people have created private green spaces for themselves, walling everyone else out.

**46** We know that economic or technological growth has not always led to better lives for most people. A social breakdown has occurred, laced with drugs, money, and human trafficking.

**47** Moreover, the digital world can stop people from living wisely; people do not have to think deeply. Ever-

present media creates a din of noise such that great poets, philosophers, mystics, and prophets go unheard. We can't distinguish their voices from the constant flow of data. Real relationships are sometimes replaced

with virtual ones. While we seem to be communicating, we are shielded from people's real fears, joys, and hopes. Such media has exciting possibilities for us – if we manage it well.

### For reflection and discussion:

How does our Australian way of life measure up in light of the pope's words in 43, 44 and 45?

Why does the pope believe we cannot adequately combat environmental degradation unless we attend to causes related to human and social degradation? (48)



# Global inequality

**48** We can see from this that deterioration in the human community and in the natural environment go hand in hand. When water runs short, the poor who depend on bottled water cannot afford it. When the seas are ruined, coastal fishing villages suffer. **[49]** These poor and excluded ones are the majority of the population of the earth, and yet few in the wealthy nations seem to understand their plight. This is because media are controlled from centers of wealth and power, beyond the reach of the poor. They don't know each other. What we want to say with force here is that a true plan to sustain nature is always also and at the same time a plan to sustain people. We must hear both the cry of the poor and the cry of the land at the same time.

**50** Some say that what we need is to forcibly reduce the birth rate and that this alone would solve our problems. But population growth is not itself the problem; extreme consumerism is. In the present way we distribute goods, a tiny minority has come to believe it has the "right" to consume in a way that could never be universalised.

The problem isn't too many mouths to feed but a lack of will to feed them. We know that one third of all food produced is wasted today and if we put our minds to it, we can change this.

**51** There is an "ecological debt" that the wealthy, generally northern nations owe to the many places around the world, from which they have exported the raw materials to sustain their wealthy lifestyle, and have done this for two centuries or more. These poor nations become the dumping ground for waste of all kinds. And when local natural resources are depleted, the

multinational companies that set up shop to get them leave town in a hurry. But they leave behind a disaster for the local people: unemployment, deforestation, poverty, depleted agricultural capabilities, pollution and, most of all, despair among the people.

**52** Such ecological debt continues to fuel the economies of the rich at the expense of the poor. In paying for climate change, therefore, we should expect that there will be "differentiated responsibilities", more paid by those who are wealthy and less by those who have little. We must come to believe that we are one human family, all of us.

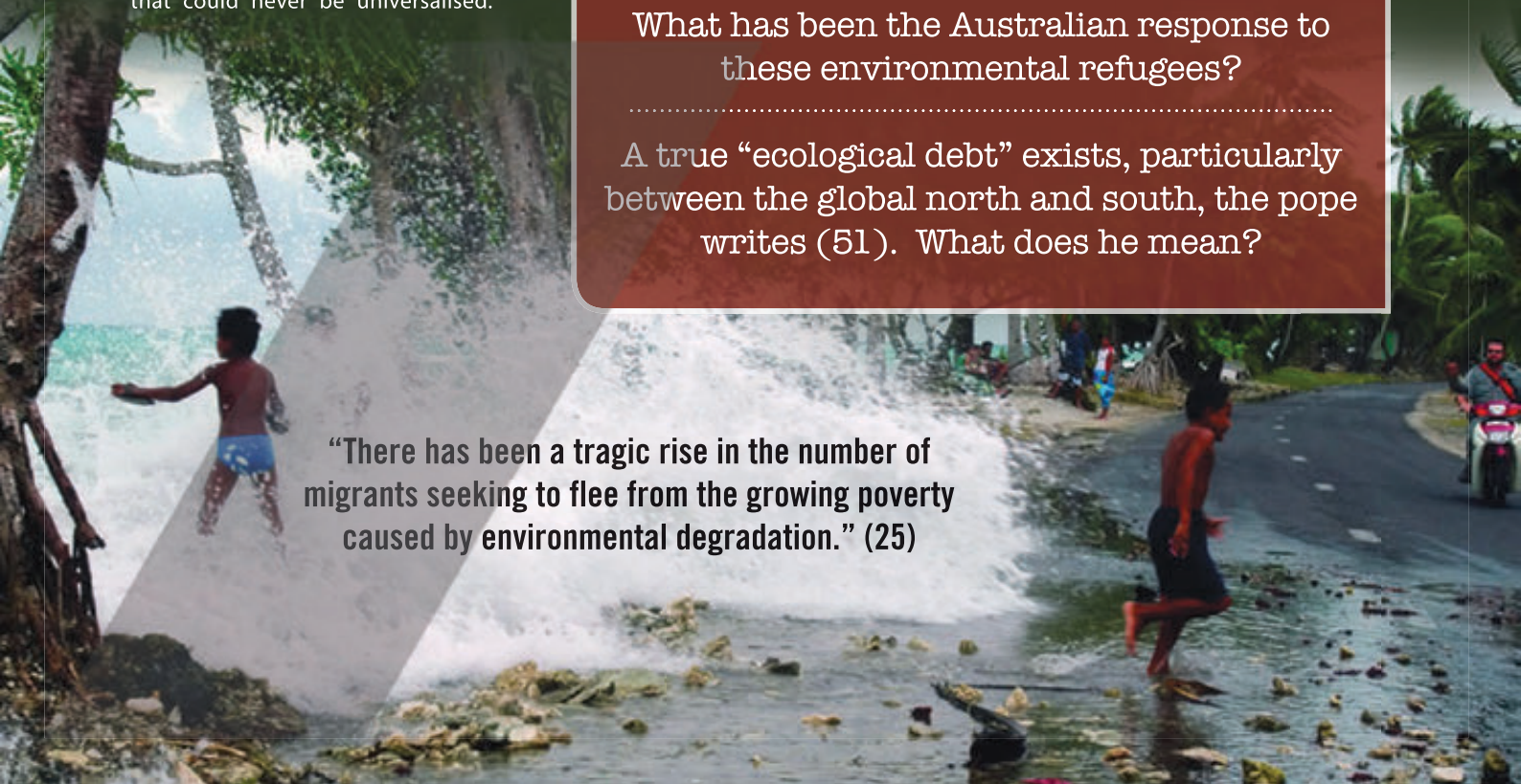
## For reflection and discussion:

Our Pacific neighbours, the people of Kiribati Island, are experiencing the extreme effects of rising sea levels and are being forced to leave their homes. The pope says we should be guided by our sense of responsibility for our fellow men and women(52).

What has been the Australian response to these environmental refugees?

A true "ecological debt" exists, particularly between the global north and south, the pope writes (51). What does he mean?

**"There has been a tragic rise in the number of migrants seeking to flee from the growing poverty caused by environmental degradation." (25)**





# Weak responses

**53** All of these factors – pollution, scarce water, declining biodiversity, a decline in the quality of life for both humans and the natural world, and global inequality – lead us to argue for change. In the whole history of the human race we have not depleted our common home as much as we have in the past two hundred years. We are out of balance, and we need leadership that will restore sanity. We also need a clear legal framework within which boundaries can be set and monitored.

**54** So many special interests at global summits easily overturn the emerging will of the people of the world. The rich fear they will lose their foothold in wealth – that somehow they have a right to more than others. In this environment, where economic interests supersede everything else and dominate the conversation, no genuine reform can occur. Those who want change are seen as romantic dreamers, a nuisance to be dealt with and set aside.

**55** Some nations are making progress now, but even in these, consumption

remains rampant. **[56]** We make our markets into our gods, and we sacrifice everything, including our home on this planet, to continue economic expansion.

**57** As resources run out, new wars will occur, and war is always a disaster for ecology, because in war, nothing can be stopped. Powerful financial interests control this, and they also control many politicians. **[58]** The improvements made in some nations to clean up waterways,

restore woodlands, and live in peace with nature are amazing, but they prove it can be done without causing a financial disaster. **[59]** Meanwhile, there is also a false ecology that takes token actions while arguing that things aren't really that bad. This way of thinking supports maintaining our current lifestyles and puts off until tomorrow the important decisions we must make today.

## For reflection and discussion:

Why does the pope think “we are out of balance, and we need leadership that will restore sanity” (53)?

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How well, in your opinion, has Australia accepted its responsibility to address global environmental challenges?

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How can we influence our government to cooperate on the global stage to address these issues?

