Sustaining Human Life on Earth

The human **population** is **increasing** rapidly and our use of earth's finite resources has increased. If humans continue to use these resources at the rate at which we are, then we will reach a point where the human population cannot be sustained on earth.

Humans use the **earth's natural resources** for warmth, shelter, food, clothing and transport. Scientists are making **technological advances** in **agricultural** and **industrial processes** to provide food and other products that meet the growing needs of the human population but it is of major importance that this is done in a sustainable way so that our finite resources are not used up.

Earth's Resources

Finite resources are those of which there is a **limited supply**, for example coal, oil and gas. These resources can be used to provide energy but, one day, their supply will run out.

Crude oil is processed through **fractional distillation** and **cracking** to produce many useful materials such as petrol, diesel and kerosene.

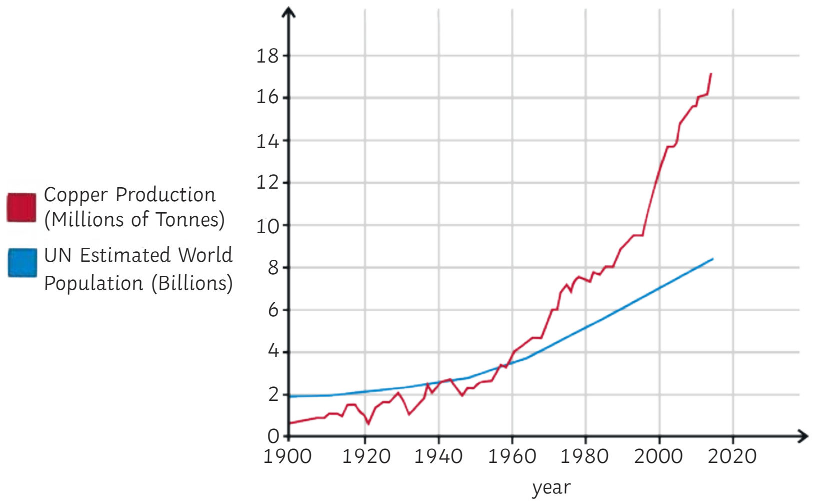
Renewable resources will not run out in the near future because the reserves of these resources are high. Examples of renewable resources include solar energy, wind power, hydropower and geothermal energy.

Haber Process and Copper

Scientists often discover new ways to produce a product; **synthetic methods** of production replace **natural methods**. For example, fertilisers were obtained from manure (a natural resource).

The **Haber process** allowed the synthetic production of **fertilisers** and this enabled **intensive farming** methods to spread across the globe. In turn, this supported the growing human population.

Copper is another resource that has been exploited over time. As the human population has increased since 1900, the demand for copper has also increased. Copper is a finite resource which means that there is a limited supply.



Water

Potable water is water that is **safe to drink**. Potable water is **not pure; dissolved impurities** still **remain** in the water. Pure water is odourless, tasteless and colourless compared to rainfall or water from streams and wells as these **harbour chemicals** such as acid.

Pure – the **definition** of a pure substance is one that contains only a single type of material that has not been contaminated by another substance.

Potable water must contain **low levels** of microbes and salts for it to be deemed safe to consume. This is because **high levels** of microbes and salts can be harmful to human health.

The methods of making water safe vary depending on where you live. Starting with sea water is harder than starting with fresh water. This is because the **energy cost** of removing large amounts of sodium chloride from seawater is greater.

In the UK, our populations' water needs are met through **rainfall**. During the **summer, water levels** in reservoirs **decrease** and local areas are encouraged to reduce their water usage by swapping baths for showers and they are asked to avoid using hosepipes.

In the UK, **insoluble particles** are **removed** from naturally occurring fresh water by passing it through **filter beds**. **Microbes** are **killed** by **sterilising the water**. Several different sterilising agents are used for potable water. These are chlorine, ozone or ultraviolet light. The right amount of chlorine and ozone gas (O_3) must be used as both are harmful to human health.

Desalination of Sea Water

If fresh water supplies are limited, sea water can undergo a process called **desalination**. This process requires **large amounts of energy**, but can be done by distillation or the use of membranes such as **reverse osmosis**.

Distillation involves **heating** the sea water until it reaches **boiling point**. Once the water is boiling, it will begin to **evaporate**. The steam then rises up where it cools and condenses in a condensing tube. The salt is left behind. The **downside** to this process is the **energy cost** of boiling the water and cooling down the steam sufficiently in the condensing tube. Not all of the water evaporates which leaves behind a **salty wastewater** that can be **difficult to sustainably dispose of** without harming aquatic organisms.

Reverse Osmosis of Salt Water

Osmosis, as you will have learnt in biology, is the **movement of particles** from an area of **high** concentration **to** an area of **low** concentration through a **semi-permeable membrane**.

Reverse osmosis involves **forcing water** through a **membrane** at **high pressure**. Each membrane has tiny holes within it that only allow water molecules to pass through. Ions and other molecules are prevented from passing through the membrane as they are too large to fit through the holes.

The **disadvantage** of this method is that it produces **large amounts of wastewater** and requires the use of **expensive membranes**. Due to a large amount of wastewater produced, the efficiency of this method is very small.

Water Treatment

Before the **wastewater** from industry, agriculture and peoples' homes can be released back into the environment, it must be **treated**.

Pollutants such as human waste contain **high levels of harmful bacteria** and **nitrogen compounds** which can be a **danger to aquatic organisms**.

Industrial and agricultural waste may contain **high levels** of **toxic metal compounds** and **fertilisers and pesticides** which may also damage the ecosystem.

Cleaning sewage requires several steps:

Step 1 – The water must be **screened**. This is where material such as branches, twigs and grit is removed.

Step 2 – The water undergoes **sedimentation**; wastewater is placed in a settlement tank. The heavier solids sink to the bottom and form a sludge whilst the lighter effluent floats on the surface above the sludge.

Step 3 - The effluent is then transferred to another tank where the organic matter undergoes **aerobic digestion**. Although not pure, this water can be safely released back into the environment. The sludge is placed in another tank where the organic matter undergoes **anaerobic digestion**. It is broken down to produce fertiliser and methane gas which can be used as an energy resource (fuel).

Required Practical 8 – Analysis and Purification of Water Samples from Different Sources

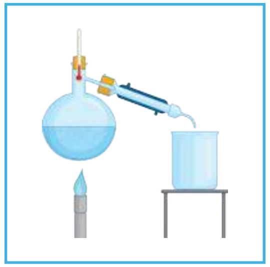
Analysing the pH of Water Samples

Test the pH of each water sample using a pH meter or universal indicator. If using universal indicator, use a pH colour chart so that you are able to identify the pH of the sample against the colour produced by the indicator.

Analysing the Mass of Dissolved Solids

To measure the mass of dissolved solids in a water sample, measure out $50cm^3$ of the sample using a measuring cylinder. Take the mass of an evaporating basin before heating and record the mass in a table. Place the measured amount of water into an evaporating basin and gently heat over a Bunsen burner until all the liquid has evaporated. Once the evaporating basin has cooled, place it on a top pan balance and record its mass. Calculate the mass of the solid left behind.

Distillation of the Water Sample



To distil a water sample, set up your equipment as per the diagram.

Heat the water sample gently using a Bunsen burner. After a short period of time, distilled water should be produced.

Life-Cycle Assessment (LCA)

Life-Cycle Assessments follow the four main stages of the life cycle of a product.

Stage 1 – Extracting the raw materials needed to make the products and then processing them.

At this stage, the energy and environmental costs need to be considered. For example, if the raw material being used is a finite or renewable resource, the energy to extract and transport the raw material should be considered. Environmental factors also play a large part in stage 1 as the extraction of the raw material can leave scars on the landscape and waste products may be produced that could damage local ecosystems.

Life-Cycle Assessment (LCA) (continued)

Stage 2 – Manufacturing and packaging of the product.

The main consideration is how much energy and resources are needed to manufacture the product. Energy may be used in the form of fuel, electricity or chemicals used in the production of the product. In the manufacturing process, there may be pollution and waste products that need to be considered. Transportation of the goods from the factory to the user will have an environmental impact.

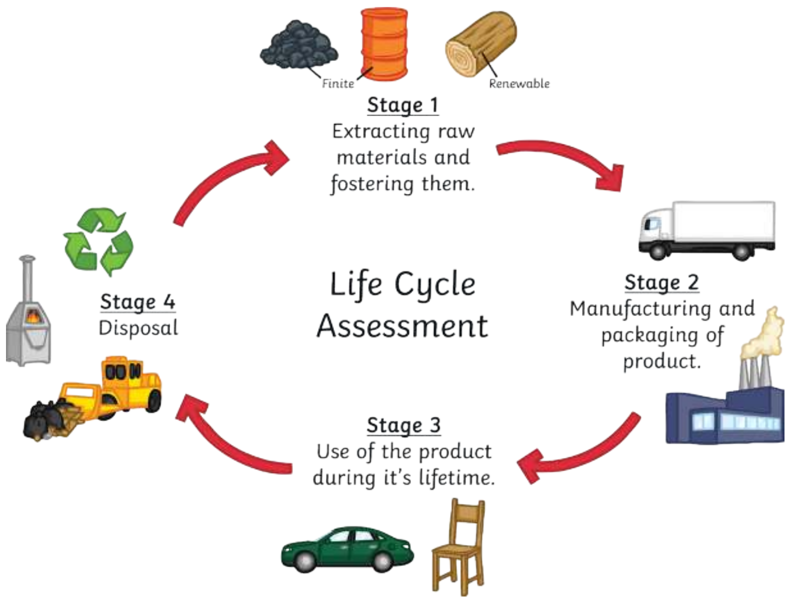
Stage 3 – Use of the product during its lifetime.

The environmental impact of a product during its life depends on the type of product. For example, a car will have a significant impact i.e. it needs to be filled with petrol or diesel, a finite resource, to get to where you are going. A car's engine releases harmful emissions into the atmosphere. On the other hand, a wooden chair may only need minor repairs and is made from a renewable resource.

Stage 4 – Disposal at the end of a product's life.

There are different methods of disposal:

1. Landfill – the product is put in a hole in the ground – high environmental impact.
2. Incineration (organic matter) – burning of the product – low environmental impact.
3. Recycling – for example, batteries contain metal compounds that are not good for the environment. By recycling, it means that no new compounds have to be taken out of the ground.



Comparative LCAs

Comparative LCAs are used to evaluate products and to find which one will have a lower environmental impact.

Stage of Life Cycle	Plastic Bag	Paper Bag
Stage 1 – raw material	Uses a finite resource (crude oil). The processes of fractional distillation, cracking and polymerisation all require energy to make crude oil useful.	Made from trees/recycled paper. Making paper from trees requires more energy than recycled paper because trees have to be chopped down. Still uses less energy than making plastics from crude oil.
Stage 2 – manufacture	Cheap to make.	More expensive to make.
Stage 3 – use	Plastic bags have a low environmental impact as they can be used a number of times. In comparison to paper bags, they are much stronger.	Paper bags can only be reused a limited number of times and so have a short lifetime.
Stage 4 – disposal	The downside to plastic bags is that they do not biodegrade easily in landfill. Recycling options are available. If they are not disposed of correctly, plastic bags can have a detrimental impact on the environment and animal habitats.	Paper bags biodegrade easily in landfill sites.

Disadvantages of Comparative LCAs

The disadvantage of **comparative LCAs** is that some parts of it require certain judgements to be made.

Different people have different opinions and this is dependent on who completes the LCA and whether a certain level of bias is added. For example, if the LCA is completed by a company that is manufacturing a specific product, they may only discuss **some** of the environmental impact of their product in the LCA. Accurate numerical values, for example, show a company how much energy has been used in the **manufacturing process** or how much **carbon dioxide** was produced when the goods were transported.

Recycling

Many materials are made from **natural resources** that have **limited supplies**. Reusing items such as glass bottles that only need washing and sterilising saves energy and reduces the environmental impact. Not all products can be reused, some need to be recycled before reuse.

There are both advantages and disadvantages to recycling materials.

Advantages

- Fewer resources such as **mines** and **quarries** are needed to remove raw, finite materials from the ground. For example, copper.
- Crude oil, the raw material used in the production of plastics, does not need to be extracted. This, in turn, **avoids** high energy cost processes such as fractional distillation and cracking. If more items are recycled, less would end up in landfill sites.
- The amount of greenhouse gases would reduce as the energy cost of recycling is a lot **less** than making a new product.

Disadvantages

- Recycling items require collection and transport of the goods to the organisation. This involves using staff, vehicles and the use of fuel.
- Some materials, such as **metals**, can be **difficult to sort**; the amount of sorting is dependent on the purity of the materials or metals and the level of purity required for the final product. For example, copper used in electrical appliances must have a high purity. To achieve this, the copper needs to be processed and then melted down again to make copper wiring.
- Steel that is used in the construction industry does not require such high purity. Often scrap iron is added to the furnace when steel is made. This reduces the need for as much iron ore and reduces the cost of making steel.

Biological Extraction Methods (Higher Tier Only)

Biological methods of extraction are needed as the resources of **metal ores** on earth are in **short supply**. Large scale **copper mining** leaves **scars on the landscape** and produces significant amounts of waste rock that must be disposed of. Biological methods have a lower impact on the environment and make use of waste containing small amounts of copper. The disadvantages of **biological extraction methods** are that they are **slow**, but they do reduce the need to obtain new ore through mining and conserve limited supplies of high-grade ore.

Phytomining

Phytomining involves the use of **plants**. Plants absorb the metal compounds found in the soil. The plants cannot get rid of the copper ions and it builds up in the leaves. The plants are then **harvested, dried** and then placed in a furnace. The ash that is produced from the burning process contains soluble metal compounds that can be extracted. The ash is dissolved in an acid such as hydrochloric or sulfuric and the copper is then extracted by electrolysis or through a **displacement reaction** with iron.

Bioleaching

Bioleaching uses **bacteria** to produce an acidic solution called **leachate** which contains **copper ions**. The disadvantage of bioleaching is that it produces **toxic substances** that are **harmful to the environment**. To process the copper, the copper undergoes a displacement reaction with iron. Iron is cheaper and a **more cost-effective** way of producing copper from the leachate.