



On American Sustainability - Anatomy of Societal Collapse (Summary)

Posted by [Gail the Actuary](#) on May 13, 2009 - 9:52am

Topic: [Environment/Sustainability](#)

Tags: [chris clugston](#), [collapse](#), [sustainability](#) [[list all tags](#)]

This guest post by Chris Clugston is a high level summary of a detailed analysis of America's "predicament" and its inevitable consequences that he also prepared. His complete analysis and associated models, evidence, and references can be found at [this link](#).

On American Sustainability—Anatomy of a Societal Collapse (Summary)

The Real "Inconvenient Truth"

Most Americans believe that we are "exceptional"—both as a society and as a species. We believe that America was ordained through divine providence to be the societal role model for the world. And we believe that through our superior intellect, we can harness and even conquer Nature in our continuous quest to improve the material living standards associated with our ever-increasing population.

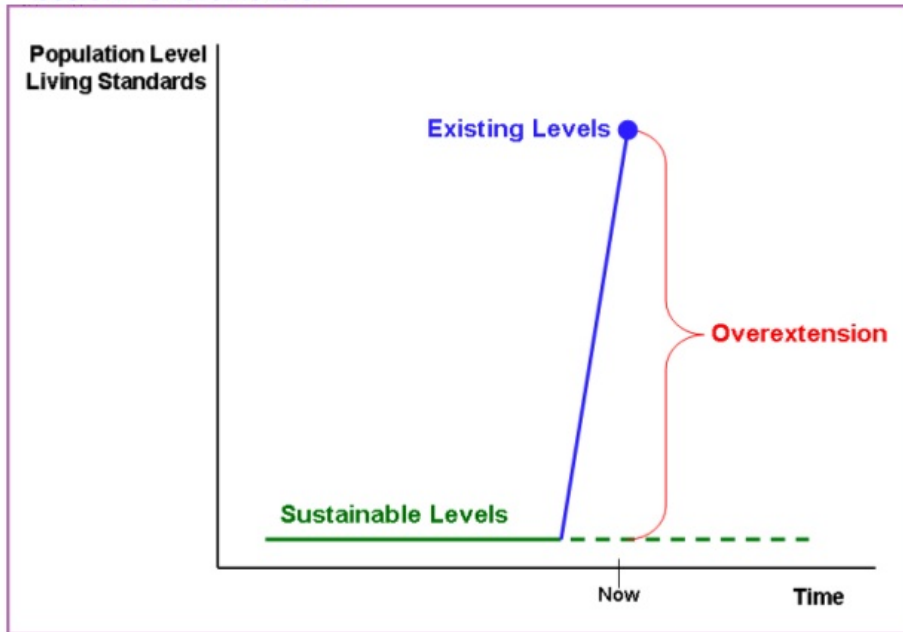
The truth is that our pioneering predecessors drifted, quite by accident, upon a veritable treasure trove of natural resources and natural habitats, which they wrested by force from the native inhabitants, and which we have persistently overexploited in order to create and perpetuate our American way of life. The truth is that through our "divine ordination" and "superior intellect", we have been persistently and systematically eliminating the very resources upon which our way of life and our existence depend.

We now find ourselves in a "predicament". We are irreparably overextended—living hopelessly beyond our means ecologically and economically—at a time when the supplies of many critical resources upon which we depend will soon be insufficient to enable our American way of life. We are about to discover that we are simply another unsustainable society subject to the inescapable consequence of our unsustainable resource utilization behavior—societal collapse.

America's Predicament—Societal Overextension

Societal Overextension

Societal Overextension



Societal overextension is a condition in which a society is living beyond its means ecologically and economically. The significant consequence associated with societal overextension is that the society's population level and material living standards are unsustainable.

Societal overextension occurs when a society's lifestyle paradigm, its "way of life", is enabled by the persistent overexploitation of ecological resources and economic resources.

Ecological resource over-exploitation occurs when a society:

- Persistently utilizes renewable natural resources that are critical to its existence—such as water, croplands, grazing lands, wildlife, and forests—at levels exceeding those at which Nature can replenish them;
- Persistently utilizes nonrenewable natural resources that are critical to its existence—such as oil, natural gas, coal, minerals, and metals—which Nature does not replenish; and/or
- Persistently degrades atmospheric, aquatic, and terrestrial natural habitats that are critical to its existence, at levels exceeding those at which Nature can regenerate them.

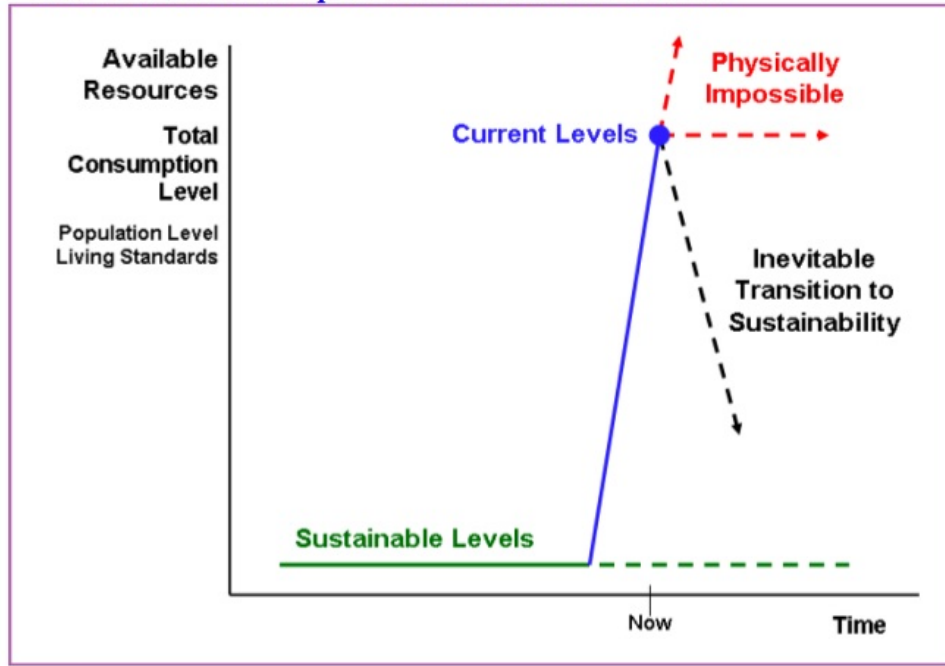
Economic resources such as income, savings, and debt provide the "purchasing power" that enables people to procure natural resources and the manmade goods and services derived from those natural resources. Economic resource overexploitation occurs when a society:

- Persistently depletes its previously accumulated economic asset (wealth) reserves;
- Persistently incurs intergenerational debt, which it has neither the capacity nor the intention to repay; and/or
- Persistently underfunds investments critical to its future wellbeing.

An overextended society is unsustainable, and will inevitably collapse.

Consequence of American Societal Overextension

The Inevitable Consequence of Societal Overextension



Our American way of life is absolutely dependent upon ecological resources and economic resources, the supplies of which will be utterly insufficient in the not-too-distant future to support our existing population level and living standards, let alone continued increases in either or both. As a result, our American way of life—300+ million people enjoying historically unprecedented material living standards—is not sustainable; it must come to an end.

As the historically abundant and cheap resources upon which our American way of life depends become increasingly scarce and expensive, a scenario that is already in process, the total level of natural resources and derived goods and services available for our consumption will decline dramatically, as must some combination of our population level and material living standards.

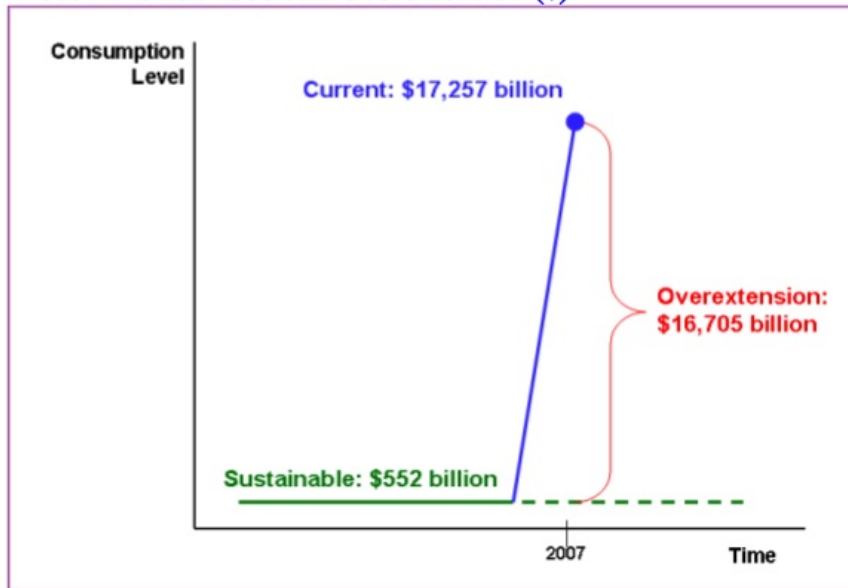
Absent immediate fundamental changes to both our distorted worldview and our dysfunctional resource utilization behavior, American society will collapse—not in 1000 years, or 500 years, or even 50 years; but almost certainly within 25 years. America, as we know it, will cease to exist well before the year 2050.

The Magnitude of America's Predicament

American Societal Overextension Quantified

The extent to which we are currently living unsustainably beyond our means is appalling.

2007 American Societal Overextension (\$)



In 2007, nearly 97% of our total consumption level was enabled by ecological resources and economic resources, the supplies of which are unsustainable.

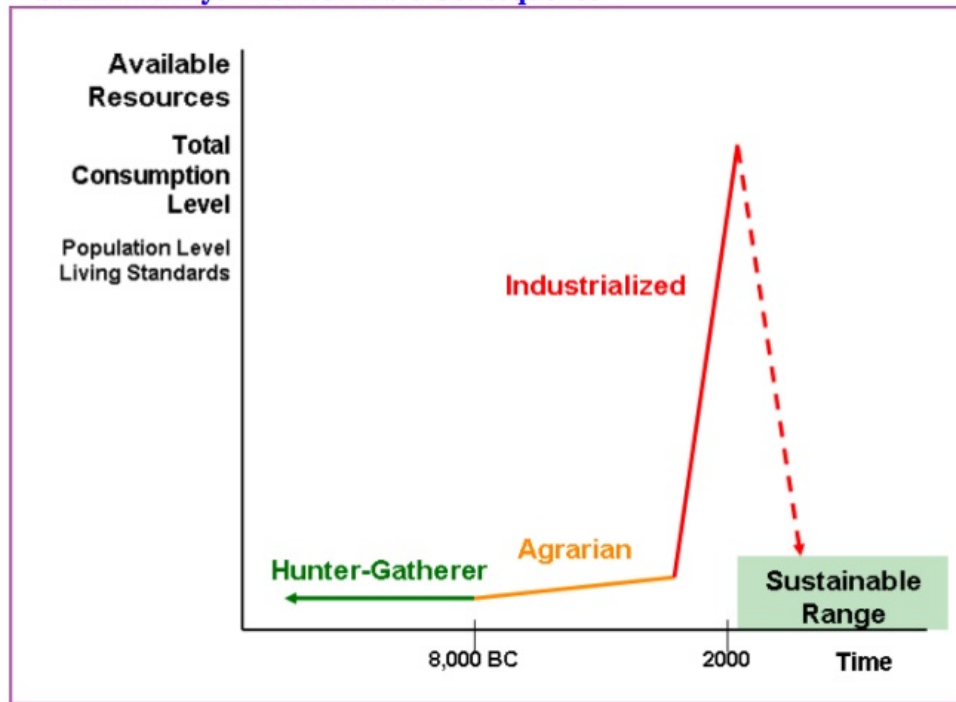
In an attempt to put the incredible magnitude associated with our predicament into perspective, it is as though we are currently spending \$30.40 from a finite, one-time inheritance for each \$1 of current income that we earn—almost 97% of our current total consumption level is enabled by our dwindling inheritance. So while we have grown accustomed to living unsustainably on \$31.40, we will have to learn to live sustainably on only \$1—soon.

The Resolution of America's Predicament

Sustainability is Inevitable

Most Americans believe that any conceivable problem can and will be resolved through some combination of American ingenuity, technical innovation, hard work, and perseverance. “They”, presumably a different “they” than the “they” who allegedly cause all of our societal level problems, have always developed timely solutions to our problems in the past—and they always will.

Sustainability: The Inevitable Consequence

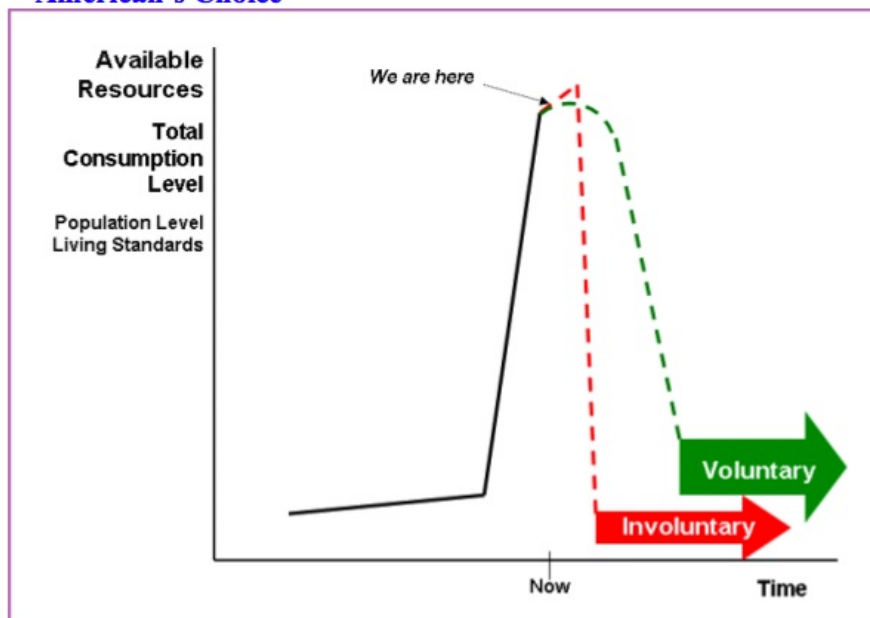


The reality is that our American way of life cannot be perpetuated through ingenuity and technical innovation; nor can it be perpetuated through hard work and perseverance—it cannot be perpetuated, period. Our American way of life is not sustainable—it must and will come to an end in the not-too-distant future.

Our predicament—irreparable societal overextension resulting from our persistent overexploitation of the increasingly scarce ecological and economic resources that enable our very existence—cannot be resolved within the context of our existing inherently-overexploitive lifestyle paradigm, which is responsible for our predicament in the first place. No amount of ingenuity, innovation, and effort can create unlimited resources on a finite planet.

America's Choice: Voluntary or Involuntary Transition to Sustainability

American's Choice



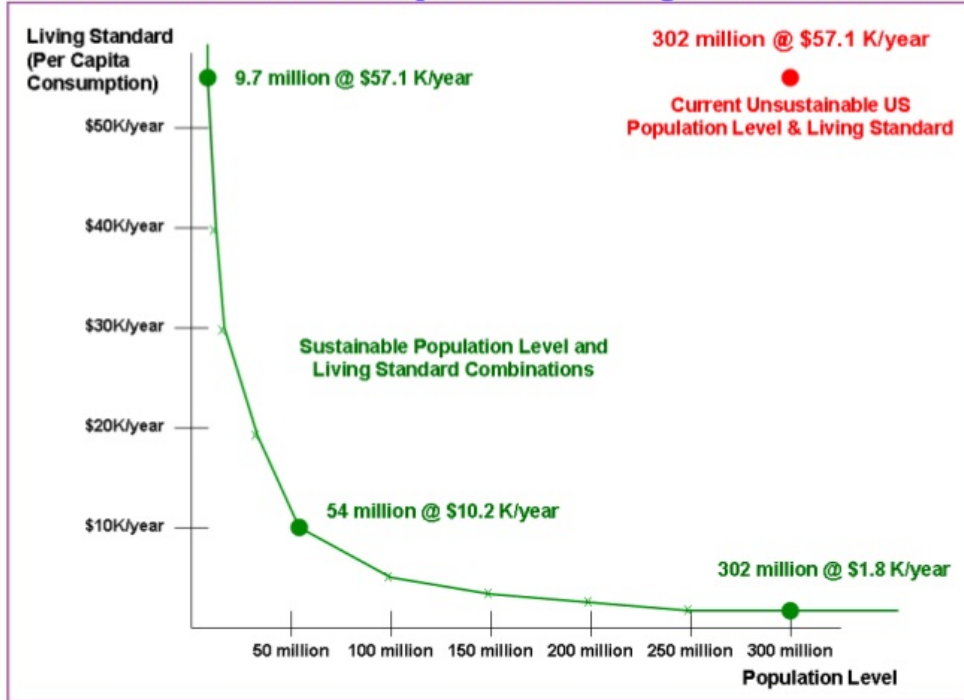
Our choice is not whether we “wish to be” sustainable; our choice involves the process by which we “will become” sustainable. We can transition to a sustainable lifestyle paradigm voluntarily, thereby mitigating our consequent population level and living standard reductions. Or, we can refrain from taking preemptive action and allow Nature to orchestrate our transition through societal collapse, thereby causing us to experience catastrophic reductions in our population level and living standards.

There are no other alternatives—we “will be” sustainable, either voluntarily or involuntarily; and we will be sustainable soon. Our maximum attainable population level and living standards at sustainability will be determined by our transition process.

Sustainable American Lifestyle Attributes

Even under the most optimistic scenario, whereby we transition voluntarily to a sustainable lifestyle paradigm, our population level and living standard combinations attainable “at sustainability” will be substantially lower than those that we currently enjoy.

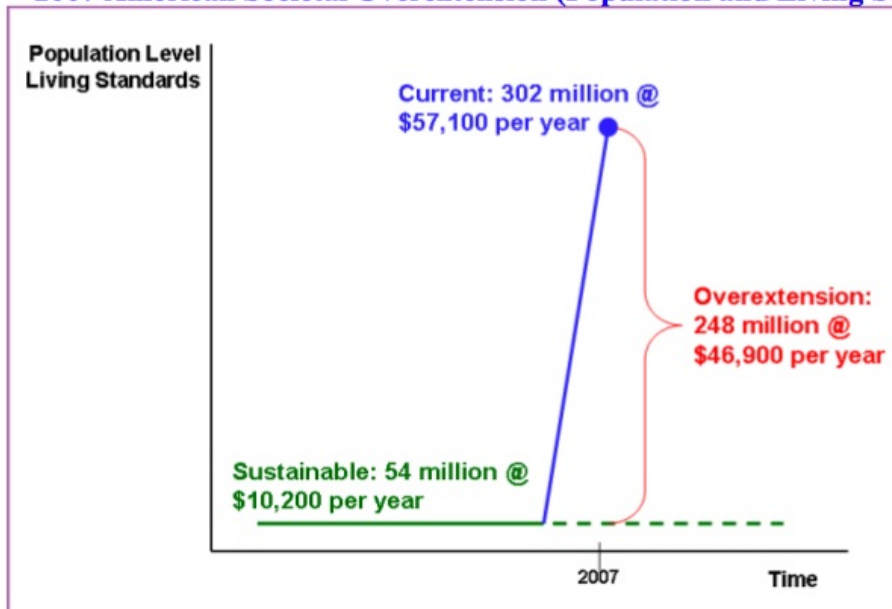
Estimated Sustainable US Population and Living Standard Combinations



Should we choose to maintain our current population level of 302 million people, our sustainable average living standard (per capita consumption level) would be approximately 3.2% of its current level—essentially that of Cambodia and North Korea today.

If we choose instead to maintain our current average material living standard, America could support a sustainable population of only 9.7 million people.

2007 American Societal Overextension (Population and Living Standards)



Or, by choosing to reduce our population level and living standards equally, by approximately 82% each, we could attain a sustainable population of approximately 54 million people with average material living standards comparable to those of Kazakhstan and Cuba today.

America's Destiny

We are the hapless perpetrators of our own demise: we are driving full speed on the self-chosen “industrialization” highway toward a minefield of lethal limits to our existing lifestyle paradigm; yet we are culturally incapable of stopping or of exiting from the highway.

America's Paradox

The cause of our “success” will be the cause of our demise...

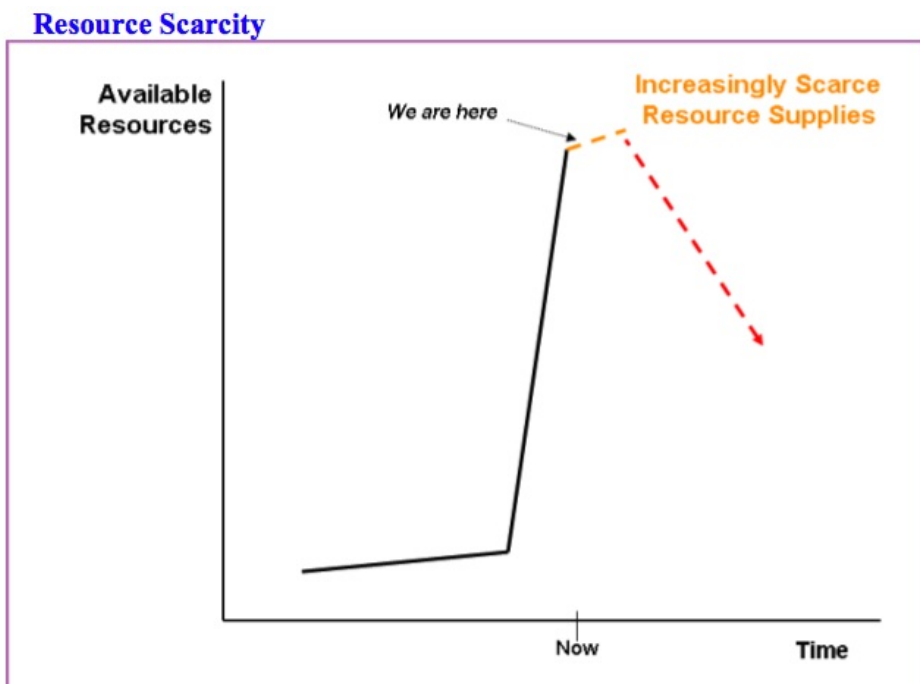
America's culture of persistent resource overexploitation has enabled our historically unprecedented “success”—our extraordinary American way of life. Unfortunately, our culture of persistent resource overexploitation is also responsible for our “predicament”—irreparable societal overextension. And, since we are unwilling to voluntarily relinquish our success in order to resolve our predicament, our culture of persistent resource over-exploitation will be responsible for our inevitable demise—societal collapse.

The ultimate irony is that the more quickly we deplete remaining domestic and global resource reserves in futile attempts to perpetuate our American way of life, the more quickly we will reach a resource limit and trigger our Societal Collapse.

America's Conundrum

The only rational solution to our predicament, a voluntary transition to sustainability, is an impossible solution...

Our American way of life is enabled almost exclusively by our ever-increasing utilization of nonrenewable natural resources; yet available supplies associated with these resources are finite and are becoming increasingly scarce.



It is only a matter of time until the supply associated with one of the most critical of these resources becomes insufficient to enable our way of life. At that point, our irreparably overextended society will collapse.

A vast majority of us are “culturally incapable” of acknowledging our predicament, much less taking meaningful action to resolve it—we suffer from societal cognitive dissonance. While we acknowledge that “we have our problems”, we consider the idea that our American way of life is unsustainable to be utterly preposterous. America will continue to grow and prosper forever—because we say it will. Our vested interest in the continued success of our American way of life is simply too great to permit us to consider any argument or evidence to the contrary.

The minority who do acknowledge the reality of our predicament will continue to insist that “they”—our political and economic representatives—“fix it”; when, in fact, we ourselves are responsible for “it”, and for the fact that it cannot be fixed—because we will not allow it to be fixed. Fixing our predicament would require that we live sustainably within our means forever—a “sacrifice” that we consider to be totally unacceptable.

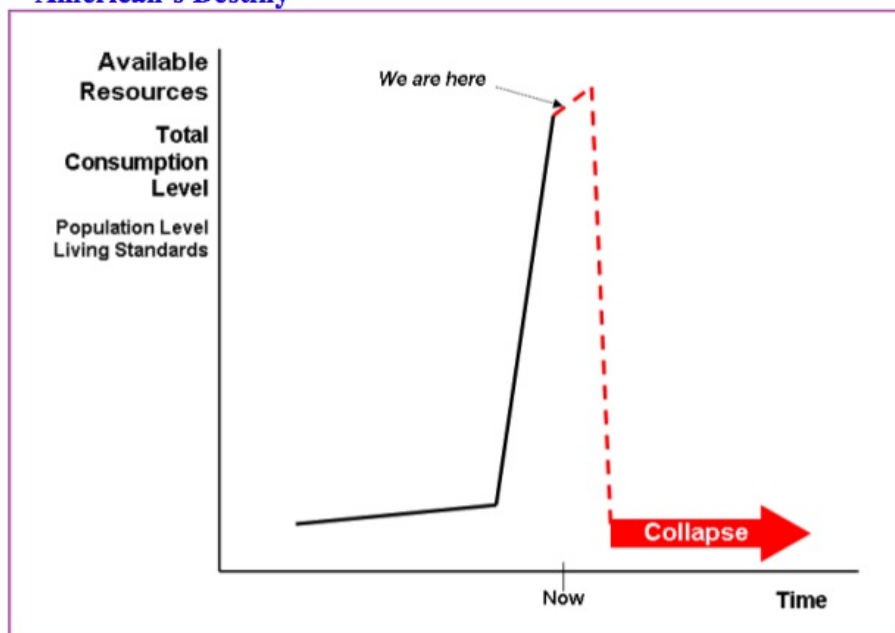
The Unraveling

We will not, therefore, take preemptive action to mitigate the consequences associated with our predicament. We will not choose to modify voluntarily our distorted, cornucopian worldview and our dysfunctional, detritovoric resource utilization behavior.

We will instead continue to use the remaining ecological and economic resources available to us in futile attempts to perpetuate our American way of life—behavior that will become increasingly desperate as we encounter increasingly severe resource supply shortages and disruptions.

We will continue to cling to the deluded belief that we can somehow substitute hope, faith, determination, technical ingenuity, and additional investment for the finite and dwindling resources that enable our unsustainable American way of life.

American's Destiny



And we will continue to adhere blindly and steadfastly to our misguided perception that we are entitled to our unsustainable American way of life, until the instant that Nature intervenes to resolve our predicament for us, horrifically, through famine, disease, and pestilence—unless we annihilate ourselves in the meantime through domestic and international resource wars.

Warning Signs

From the perspective of mainstream America and our “thought leaders”, both our Last Depression and our Societal Collapse will “arrive without warning” and will “catch us totally by surprise”. We will continue to misconstrue the early warning signs associated with our two impending disasters as “normal cyclical economic activity”.

Rather than sounding alarms and attempting to take meaningful mitigating action, we will instead persist in our futile attempts to remedy the consequences associated with our past overexploitive resource utilization behavior with ever-increasing levels of current and future overexploitive resource utilization behavior. These measures will, at best, temporarily defer our inevitable collapse—they will not “fix” that which cannot possibly be fixed.

“The American way of life is not negotiable.” – President George H. W. Bush

“George who?” – Nature



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 United States License](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/us/).