

Ecological Limits in an Age of Geopolitical Turmoil: Revisiting Limits to Growth in 2026

A Report on the Contemporary Relevance of Growth-Critical Thinking for European and Australian Policy

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Executive Summary

Fifty-four years after the [Club of Rome's landmark *Limits to Growth* \(LtG\) report](#) first warned of planetary overshoot, the core tensions identified in 1972 remain unresolved—and in many respects have intensified. This review examines the continuing relevance of LtG thinking for contemporary environmental, social, and economic policy, with particular attention to European and Australian contexts. The findings demonstrate that while ecological boundaries are increasingly recognised in scientific discourse, policy frameworks continue to rely heavily on growth-based assumptions that conflict with biophysical realities. Furthermore, the wealth distribution question that LtG acknowledged but did not adequately resolve has become central to contemporary debates around negative growth and post-growth alternatives. Recent geopolitical developments—including the second Trump administration's environmental deregulation and Russia's continued exploitation of energy leverage—compound the challenges facing socio liberal democracies attempting to transition toward sustainable economies within climate impacted global boundaries.

1. Introduction: Why *Limits to Growth* Still Matters

The 1972 *Limits to Growth* report, produced by a team led by Donella Meadows at [MIT's System Dynamics Group](#), was unprecedented in its attempt to model the interactions between five critical variables:

- population growth,
- industrial expansion,
- agricultural production,
- resource depletion, and
- pollution accumulation [1].

Using the World3 computer model, the authors demonstrated that continued exponential growth in a finite system would eventually encounter ecological limits, potentially resulting in "a *rather sudden and uncontrollable decline in both population and industrial capacity*" within the following century [2].

Critics dismissed LtG as technocratic and [neo-Malthusian](#), while proponents celebrated it as a necessary corrective to the growth ideology dominating Cold War economics[3]. Nearly half a century later, the debate has not gone away; but the empirical context has shifted dramatically. Seven of nine planetary boundaries have now been transgressed, including climate change, biodiversity loss, nitrogen and phosphorus flows, land-system change, freshwater use, and biosphere integrity [4]. Material extraction has risen from 30 billion tonnes in 1970 to 106.6 billion tonnes in 2024, driving over 60% of global greenhouse gas emissions [5].

The fundamental question remains: can we reconcile ecological limits with human wellbeing, particularly when those limits must be negotiated across deeply unequal societies?

2. Core Concepts Revisited: Overshoot, Systems Thinking, and Ecological Boundaries

2.1 Ecological Limits and Overshoot

The concept of "overshoot"—where human demand exceeds Earth's regenerative capacity, has migrated from the margins to mainstream climate discourse. The [Global Resources Outlook 2024](#) confirmed that natural resource use is "*pushing the planet beyond its limits, driving environmental damage, inequality and instability*" [5]. Australia exemplifies this tension: despite committing to net-zero targets, it continues to approve offshore fossil fuel extraction permits while simultaneously claiming leadership in climate action [6].

2.2 Systems Thinking and Interconnected Crises

LtG's legacy lies in its systems approach: by recognising that environmental, economic, and social challenges are interconnected rather than isolated. Contemporary analysis confirms these interconnections. For instance, Australia's critical minerals strategy aims to upgrade domestic extraction and processing of lithium, cobalt, and other materials essential for the energy transition [7]. Yet this strategy conflicts with ecological limits; the environmental impacts of extraction include groundwater lowering, habitat destruction, and water stress that affect surrounding ecosystems and communities [8].

European bio-economy strategies reveal similar contradictions. Research has identified two competing visions:

- a "pro-economic growth" framework focused on technological fixes and green growth; and
- versus a "pro-planetary limits" vision challenging growth itself.

Neither adequately addresses deeper socio-environmental injustices [9].

2.3 The Limits of Technology-Only Solutions

An enduring assumption in policy debates is that technological innovation will decouple economic growth from environmental impact sufficiently to maintain business-as-usual trajectories. However, widespread research evidences this optimism is misplaced. The [EU's Clean Industrial Deal](#), adopted in early 2025, represents a strategic road-map to boost European industry's competitiveness while achieving climate neutrality by 2050 [10]. Yet recent decisions—including dropping 2025 CO₂ standards for new passenger vehicles and revising the 2035 ban on internal combustion engines—are expected to generate an additional 720 MtCO₂e in GHG emissions by 2050 [10].

Technology does matter, but it must operate within biophysical constraints. Efficiency gains are routinely offset by so called rebound effects and increased consumption. As [Jason Hickel](#) notes, "green growth" strategies assume decoupling rates that empirical data does not support at the scale required [11].

3. The Wealth Distribution Challenge: North-South Divisions and Inequality

3.1 Original LtG Position on Equity

Importantly, the original LtG authors were aware of distributional issues. In the 1972 report, the report stated unequivocally that *"a brake imposed on world demographic and economic growth spirals must not lead to a freezing of the status quo of economic development of the world's nations. If such a proposal were advanced by the rich nations, it would be taken as a final act of neocolonialism"* [12]. They envisioned achieving stable conditions *"only if they serve not as springboards to reach even higher, but as staging areas from which to organize more equitable distribution of wealth and income worldwide"* [12].

Yet this caveat became lost or more concerning ignored in public debate, allowing critics to frame LtG as elitist and anti-development.

3.2 Contemporary Critiques from the Global South

Recent commentators have revived and deepened this equity critique. Research on "unequal exchange" in the global agri-food system demonstrates that "global agricultural production is increasingly performed in the global South, but global food-system incomes are increasingly captured by post-farming activities in the global North. This dynamic suggests that Northern institutions are *appropriating value from Southern land and workers*" [13].

The North-South divide remains deeply problematic: wealthy nations cover North America, Western Europe, and parts of East Asia, while poorer nations span most of Africa, Latin America, and large parts of Asia. Within-country inequality has risen dramatically, now comprising about two-thirds of total global inequality - up from less than half in 1980 [14].

3.3 Progressive Voices on Degrowth and Justice

Contemporary degrowth analysis has made equity central to its framework. Jason Hickel argues that degrowth emphasises *"the need for a planned, democratic transformation of the economic system to drastically reduce ecological impact and redistribute resources within and between nations"* [11]. His research highlights that increased economic growth in high-income countries has not translated into proportional wellbeing improvements, while billions remain unable to meet basic needs [13].

[Kate Raworth's "Doughnut Economics"](#) offers a complementary framework, positioning economic activity within a "safe and just space" bordered by social foundations (minimum standards for human wellbeing) and ecological limits (planetary boundaries) [15]. The goal is not growth for its own sake, but *"human and ecological thriving"* [16].

Giorgos Kallis and colleagues' 2025 review in *The Lancet Planetary Health* synthesises post-growth research, argues that "post-growth serves as an umbrella term for perspectives that are sceptical of economic growth. At its core are arguments over whether growth is desirable for achieving societal objectives and whether it is compatible with biophysical limits" [10]. They identify seven pillars for post-growth transitions, including reduced working hours, universal basic services, and wealth redistribution [10].

However, critics argue that degrowth or negative proponents remain *"singularly coy and shy when it comes to pointing out who is going to bear the costs of these changes"* [17]. Hickels response was, that scaling down aggregate economic activity in the Global North *"might*

reduce private riches, but...needn't reduce public wealth" and could be funded through progressive taxation measures including high marginal tax rates on top incomes, wealth taxes, and financial transaction taxes [17].

4. European Perspectives: Between Green Deal Ambitions and Competitiveness Pressures

4.1 The European Green Deal and Post-Growth Tensions

The [EU's Green Deal](#) represents the continent's most ambitious attempt to reconcile environmental objectives with economic policy. Launched in 2019 and expanded through 2025, it encompasses 168 initiatives, of which 98 have been adopted by the Parliament and Council [9]. Key policies include the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), revised Energy Efficiency Directive, and Just Transition Fund [9].

However, discord is evident. The European Environment Bureau's 2024 briefing on "A Post-Growth European Green Industrial Policy" warns of *"a potentially alarming turn towards the deregulation of green and environmental policy, in favour of industrial competitiveness and economic growth"* [18]. The EU's emphasis on "competitiveness" in the next Commission mandate signals a shift away from ecological constraints toward growth prioritisation [18].

Research done by Bärnthaler (2025), proposes a post-growth industrial policy for Europe with three main pillars:

- reducing less-necessary production to enable faster decarbonization,
- focusing on socially valuable sectors, and
- democratically planning economic transformation [19].

This contrasts sharply with the EU's current trajectory, which maintains growth as a central policy objective despite mounting evidence that growth-compatible decarbonisation pathways are insufficient to stay within planetary boundaries [19].

4.2 Citizen Attitudes and Political Feasibility

Public opinion research alters the picture. A 2026 study in *Nature Communications* examining EU citizens' views on economic growth and climate policy found substantial variation in attitudes across member states, with younger cohorts showing greater openness to post-growth alternatives [10]. However, political feasibility remains constrained by electoral considerations and competing generally short term economic priorities.

The EU's circular economy agenda exemplifies this tension. Europe's circularity rate stands at approximately 12%, with a target to double it to 24% by 2030 under the Clean Industrial Deal [20]. Yet the Commission launched a public consultation on an upcoming Circular Economy Act in August 2025, suggesting implementation is still *aspirational* rather than operational [20].

4.3 Member State Variations

Implementation varies significantly across member states. The Stockholm Environment Institute's EU Green Policy Tracker, launched in early 2025, tracks roll out in Sweden and Estonia of four European Green Deal (EGD) policies, reveals divergent approaches to alignment with national legislative frameworks [9]. Sweden has generally maintained stronger environmental protections, while Estonia has shown greater willingness to prioritise industrial competitiveness over strict ecological standards [9].

These variations reflect broader issues within the EU between northern and southern members, older and newer member states, and economies dependent on different sectors (tourism, manufacturing, extractive industries and niche electronics).

5. Australian Context: Resource Extraction Dominates Despite Climate Commitments

5.1 Policy Contradictions

Australia presents a dramatic case of policy contradiction. It has committed to ambitious emissions reduction targets while simultaneously expanding fossil fuel infrastructure. The Commonwealth Resources Minister Madeleine King, in a May 2024 press statement, emphasised that "*natural gas is crucial for a sustainable energy transition*," using this reasoning to justify gas exploration permits granted in 2024 [6].

This form of framing demonstrates what environmental policy academic Sian Park (2024) terms "ecocidal middle power" behaviour: supporting international environmental law while simultaneously contributing to climate change through resource extraction policies [21]. Australia continues to award new offshore fossil fuel acreage despite having no releases in 2023, creating a disjuncture between climate commitments and extraction permissions [6].

5.2 Critical Minerals and Green Transition Paradox

Australia's position as a major critical mineral supplier creates another paradox. The country ranks among top global producers of lithium (86,000 metric tons production, 6.3 million tons known reserves) [8]. Government strategies aim to upgrade domestic extraction and processing capacity, positioning Australia as a key player in the global energy transition supply chain [7].

Yet extraction for "green" technologies carries significant environmental costs. Research on raw materials for the energy transition documents groundwater lowering, habitat destruction, and disproportionate impacts on areas with high conservation values [8]. Mining can have "*disproportionately severe impact*" in rain-forests or wetlands hosting high biodiversity, including endemic and rare species [8].

5.3 Environmental Policy Debate Framing

Australian environmental policy debate remains characterised by binary framing: "development versus the environment, which serves to frame environmental debate in binary terms—you are either 'pro' or 'anti' development, there are no shades of grey" [22]. This discourse undermines effective environmental governance by casting ecological limits as incompatible with prosperity rather than as conditions for long-term sustainability.

The Committee for Economic Development of Australia (CEDA) has begun challenging this formulation, advocating for decoupling prosperity from resource extraction through circular, resource-efficient economies [5]. Dr. Janez Potočnik, speaking at CEDA's Circularity 2024 Conference, emphasised that material use—not just carbon emissions—is the overlooked driver of environmental crises [5].

5.4 Indigenous Perspectives and Justice-Oriented Approaches

Indigenous voices offer alternative perspectives grounded in relational rather than extractive worldviews. Resistance against natural resource extraction in the global south demonstrates that "as long as decision-making powers are exclusionary, meaningful sustainability will

continue to be hijacked by governments and multinational corporations"[8]. Including Indigenous knowledge systems and ensuring procedural justice are essential for legitimacy and effectiveness in environmental governance.

HOPE Inc. (Australia)'s project framework explicitly seeks to communicate ecological limits in "justice-oriented language, rather than framed as austerity, decline or anti-development"[original document]. This aligns with negative growth analysis emphasising democratic deliberation and social provisioning over mere reduction of consumption.

6. Geopolitical Disruptions: Trump Administration and Russian Resource Hegemony

6.1 The Second Trump Administration's Environmental Rollbacks

Donald Trump's return to the presidency in 2025 significantly accelerated environmental deregulation with significant implications for global climate governance. The administration's EPA moved to repeal the landmark "*endangerment finding*" that allows climate regulation under the Clean Air Act, calling climate change "*the greatest con job ever perpetrated on the world*" [23].

In September 2026, the EPA finalised repeal of the Biden administration's carbon pollution standards for power plants—rules projected to prevent 1,200 premature deaths in 2035 alone and provide \$120 billion in health benefits through 2047 [24]. Preliminary analysis by the US Environmental Defense Fund, indicates that increased pollution from this rollback would cause more than \$1 trillion in additional health costs and over 80,000 additional premature deaths through 2047 [25].

The administration also lowered fuel economy standards, ending mandates requiring automakers to produce electric vehicles[26]. Transportation Secretary Sean Duffy characterised the change as ending "*the illegal mandate that forced automakers to produce more expensive electric vehicles that American families didn't want*"[26].

These actions represent a decisive rejection of ecological limits as a policy constraint, prioritising short-term economic interests over long-term sustainability.

6.2 Russia's Energy Hegemony Strategy

Putin's Russia continues to weaponise energy resources as a geopolitical tool, demonstrating how resource concentration enables strategic leverage. Following the EU's announcement of permanent bans on Russian gas imports (LNG from April 2025, pipeline gas from June 2026), Russia hinted at pre-emptively terminating gas sales to exploit energy crises caused by Iran conflict dynamics [27].

Despite EU sanctions targeting Russian energy infrastructure, Moscow has targeted and embraced Asian markets. Russian pipelined gas shipments to China outpaced Qatar's liquefied gas shipments already prior to March 2026, with Russian supplies exceeding Qatari supplies since early 2024 [27]. Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak announced in Beijing that Russia sees scope to boost oil exports to China and deepen cooperation on LNG supplies [28].

However, Russia's energy revenues have plummeted 50%—the lowest level of the Putin regime; with January 2026 collections at just \$5.1 billion in oil and gas taxes[29]. The price of Russian Urals oil dropped to \$39-\$40 per barrel, significantly below the \$59 assumed in

budget plans, creating a potential \$131 billion deficit increase in 2026 [29]. Ukraine's strikes on Russian oil refineries have exacerbated supply disruptions, with Putin acknowledging gas station queues and fuel shortages domestically [30].

Notwithstanding, Russia maintains strategic partnerships. During a December 2025 visit to India, Putin pledged "uninterrupted" fuel supplies despite US pressure on India to stop buying Russian oil [31]. Hungary's Viktor Orbán met Putin in November 2025 to secure additional oil and gas supplies following a US sanctions exemption [32]. Little is clear if Hungary's new administration still shares that vision.

This blueprint gives a clear indication of how resource-dependent states can leverage energy exports to build geopolitical alliances while undermining multilateral climate governance. Russia's approach treats energy not as a common challenge requiring coordinated management, but as a competitive advantage to be exploited in great power rivalry.

6.3 Implications for Ecological Limits Discourse

These geopolitical developments complicate the ecological limits conversation in several ways:

1. **Fragmentation of Climate Governance:** The Trump administration's withdrawal from climate commitments and Russia's weaponisation of energy exports fragment international coordination essential for managing global commons.
2. **Competitive Resource Scenarios:** Both superpowers frame resource access through zero-sum competition rather than collaborative sustainability, reinforcing the growth ideology that LtG critiqued.
3. **Security Primacy Over Sustainability:** Geopolitical rivalries promote energy security above environmental considerations, enabling continued expansion of fossil fuel infrastructure under national security pretexts.
4. **Global South Agency:** Countries like India exercise strategic autonomy by balancing between major powers and demonstrating that resource-rich developing nations can resist pressure to align with any single bloc's environmental (or anti-environmental) agenda.

7. Toward Hopeful, Justice-Oriented Frameworks for Communicating Ecological Limits

7.1 Beyond Austerity Narratives

A pervasive hurdle facing accepting ecological limits is the perception that sustainability requires sacrifice, decline, or reduced well-being. This report directly challenges this characterisation. Post-growth research emphasises that *"to address coupled challenges [of planetary boundaries and unmet human needs], societies should move away from economic growth as the main policy goal, and instead reaching the goals of environmental sustainability, social equity, and human wellbeing"* [33].

This repurposing shifts the question from "how much must we give up?" to "what kind of economy delivers well being within planetary boundaries?"

The answer involves democratic planning, reduced working hours, universal basic services, and wealth redistribution—measures that enhance collective wellbeing rather than diminish it.

7.2 HOPE . (Australia) Advocacy Framework

For organisations like HOPE Inc. (Australia), translating ecological limits into public engagement requires several strategic shifts:

1. **Connect environmental sustainability with fairness:** Emphasise that current resource extraction patterns disproportionately benefit elites while local communities bear environmental burdens.
2. **Frame resilience as collective capacity:** Highlight how reducing dependence on volatile global markets and resource-intensive lifestyles builds community autonomy and security.
3. **Inter-generational responsibility:** Appeal to concern for future generations without invoking apocalyptic scenarios that trigger defensive responses.
4. **Demonstrate feasible alternatives:** Showcase existing post-growth experiments—from municipal basic services to cooperative enterprises—that deliver wellbeing without growth imperatives.
5. **Link to immediate concerns:** Connect ecological limits to housing affordability, health costs, and job quality; issues voters prioritise over abstract environmental metrics.

7.3 European and Australian Policy Recommendations

Pulling down on available research, several policy directions emerge:

At the European level:

- Implement genuine post-growth industrial policy reducing unnecessary production in high-income economies¹
- Strengthen CBAM to prevent carbon leakage while avoiding protectionist backlash
- Expand just transition mechanisms to ensure working-class constituencies benefit from ecological transformation
- Reform fiscal architecture to internalise ecological costs through resource and pollution taxes

In Australia:

- Align resource extraction approvals with scientifically determined carbon budgets and biodiversity limits
- Invest in circular economy infrastructure to reduce material throughput while maintaining employment
- Include Indigenous knowledge systems and ensure procedural justice in environmental governance
- Communicate transition as opportunity for economic diversification rather than loss

Transnationally:

- Build coalitions among Global South and sympathetic Northern actors in challenging resource-driven geopolitical competition
- Establish minimum resource use standards alongside maximum emission thresholds to prevent ecological imperialism
- Create democratic mechanisms for deliberating trade-offs between development aspirations and ecological constraints

8. Conclusion: Unfinished Business from 1972

The *Limits to Growth* project remains 'unfinished business'. Those authors identified the central challenge: achieving stable conditions within planetary boundaries while organising more equitable distribution of wealth and income worldwide². Fifty-four + years later, this challenge is more time critical and more contentious.

Progressive commentators have crystallised the analytic framework, placing equity at the centre rather than the periphery. Jason Hickel, Kate Raworth, Giorgos Kallis, and others have developed post-growth alternatives that reject both growth fetishism and austerity politics. Such seminal work demonstrates that ecological limits need not imply deprivation — if accompanied by redistributive measures and democratic planning.

Policy frameworks in both Europe and Australia continue operating within growth paradigms that conflict with biophysical reality. The European Green Deal prioritises competitiveness over ecological constraints; Australia expands fossil fuel extraction while claiming climate leadership. Meanwhile, geopolitical rivalries between the United States, Russia, and emerging powers fracture international coordination precisely when it is most needed.

The hope lies not in technological silver bullets quick solutions to complex questions nor policy edits, but in fundamental restructuring of economic objectives and power relations. As the Club of Rome reflected in reviewing LtG's legacy, the original report's insights remain valid even when policy-makers ignore them⁶. Whether humanity can organise equitably within planetary boundaries in the remaining decades of this century depends on choices made now.

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