

THE ANTHROPOCENE

Next year the International Union of Geological Sciences will report on the outcome of one of the biggest scientific debates of our time: whether the Earth has entered a new geological epoch. For the last ten thousand years - a period that has seen the birth and flourishing of human civilisation – we have been living through the Holocene. But there is an emerging consensus that this epoch may now be over, superseded by a new age, the Anthropocene - ***The age of humans***. The reason for this change is stark: human activities are now having such a huge and decisive impact on the Earth that our species has become a geological force.

Colonialism, global trade and coal have brought about the Anthropocene. European exploitation of other continents in the 17th century and the Industrial Revolution of the 18th century speeded its progress, but the destructive reality of this new epoch has only really hit home in the last half century. Since 1950, we have seen an unprecedented global increase in the human population, accelerating extinction, climate change, urbanisation and industrialisation and the development of novel materials, from persistent organic pollutants to genetically engineered organisms.

Extinction rates are currently running at between 100 and 1,000 times the natural level. Even nuclear bomb tests have left their radioactive traces in tree-rings. Today, we humans are eating away at our own life support systems at an unprecedented rate.

At this rate, humanity's impact on the planet will be comparable to that of the meteor that wiped out the dinosaurs. That will be the legacy of the Anthropocene. But unlike that meteor, humans know what we are doing. We are conscious agents of the current destruction and in that consciousness lies hope for the future.