

Each week, about 1.6 million people are added to the world's population. As a result, the number of people on the earth is projected to increase from 6.7 to 9.3 billion or more between 2008 and 2050, with most of this growth occurring in the world's developing countries (Figure 6–1). This raises an important question: Can the world provide an adequate standard of living for a projected 2.6 billion more people by 2050 without causing widespread environmental damage? There is disagreement over the answer to this question. According to one view, the planet already has too many people collectively degrading the earth's natural capital. To some analysts, the problem is the sheer number of people in developing countries with 82% of the world's population. To others, it is high per capita resource consumption rates in developed countries—and to an increasing extent in rapidly developing countries such as China and India—that magnify the environmental impact, or ecological footprint, of each person (Figure 1–10, p. 15). Many argue that both population growth and resource consumption per person are important causes of the environmental problems we face (Concept 1–5A, p. 17). Another view is that technological advances have allowed us to overcome the environmental resistance that all populations face (Figure 5–11, p. 111) and to increase the earth's carrying capacity for our species. Some analysts argue there is no reason we cannot continue doing so, and they believe that the planet can support billions more people. They also see a growing population as our most valuable resource for solving environmental and other problems and for stimulating economic growth by increasing the number of consumers. As a result, they see no need to control the world's population growth. Some people view any form of population regulation as a violation of their religious or moral beliefs. Others see it as an intrusion into their privacy and their freedom to have as many children as they want. These people also would argue against any form of population control. Proponents of slowing and eventually stopping population growth have a different view. They point out that we are not providing the basic necessities for about one of every five people—a total of some 1.4 billion. They ask how we will be able to do so for the projected 2.6 billion more people by 2050. They also warn of two serious consequences we will face if we do not sharply lower birth rates. First, death rates may increase because of declining health and environmental conditions in some areas, as is already happening in parts of Africa. Second, resource use and environmental degradation may intensify as more consumers increase their already large ecological footprints in developed countries and in rapidly developing countries, such as China and India (Figure 1–10, p. 15). This could increase environmental stresses such as infectious disease, biodiversity losses, water shortages, traffic congestion, pollution of the seas, and climate change. This debate over interactions among population growth, economic growth, politics, and moral beliefs is one of the most important and controversial issues in environmental science.