

Limits to Growth Theory: Comparing Different Models and Mechanisms of Constraint

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Executive Summary

In the course of this thesis it is attempted to get an overview on selected literature on the topic of limits to growth theory. More precisely, the idea was to look at existing literature dealing with this topic, choosing some of this literature to work with and analyzing these chosen pieces of work in terms of their position towards growth in terms of the size of an economy and the ecological footprint this economy leaves behind. As a common feature, all of the models find that growth – either economic, in ecological footprint or both – is or should be limited in one way or another.

The thesis starts off by introducing the topic and the questions associated with it.

Afterwards, four different models are presented, each of the models taking a rather unique position towards economic growth and growth in ecological footprint.

Each model is introduced and summarized. It is then analyzed in terms of its framework or the assumptions it is based upon as well as what position that particular model takes towards growth – both economic and in ecological footprint – and what points of criticism might be brought forward against the discussed model and its reasoning.

The four models presented here have been chosen because of their different positions towards growth and the way they tackle the question of growth.

One of the models is just pointing out the problems that growth in ecological footprint comes with, making no limiting statements concerning economic growth at all.

Another one is answering to this first model but sees growth in ecological footprint limited through naturally occurring limitations in economic growth long before the predicted ecological problems would start to appear.

A third model is acknowledging problems growth in ecological footprint comes with, tries to decouple it from economic growth and is a strong advocate of sustainable economic growth as a vital part of our economic system.

The last model analyzed takes a rather practical approach to the matter as it is simply acknowledging problems both economic growth and growth in ecological footprint often come with and is thus trying to show that reducing both kinds of growth is possible without the detrimental effects often warned about by advocates of economic growth.

After summarizing and analyzing the chosen models a brief part of the thesis is spent on the abundance of literature concerned with sustainability in contrast to politics, where this topic is massively underrepresented in comparison. Possible reasons for this underrepresentation are examined.



Finally it is attempted to formulate recommendations for future literature based upon the summaries and analyses made. Firstly for each model and the accompanying theories, secondly for literature on the topic in general.

Then an outlook is given as to how literature might develop given the latest findings in publications and identifying trends following from that. This is done using an exemplary model that unifies many of the features identified to be important for future literature on the topic.