

# Trends in Global Agricultural Land Use: Implications for Environmental Health and Food Security

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## **Abstract**

The 18<sup>th</sup> century Malthusian prediction of population growth outstripping food production have not yet come to bear. Unprecedented agricultural land expansion since 1700, and technological innovations from the Green Revolution of the 1950s, have enabled more calorie production per capita than was ever available before in history. This remarkable success, however, has come at a great cost. Agriculture is a major cause of global environmental degradation.

Undernourishment and micronutrient deficiencies persist among large parts of the population, and a new epidemic of obesity is on the rise. We review both the successes and failures of the global food system, addressing ongoing debates on pathways to environmental health and food security. To deal with these challenges, a new coordinated research program blending modern breeding with agro-ecological methods is needed. We call on plant biologists to lead this effort, and help steer humanity toward a “safe operating space” for agriculture.

**Keywords: agriculture, food production, food security, environment, land use**

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Agricultural lands constitute the largest biome on this planet (42), occupying a third of the global ice-free land area (118). Agriculture is still a major livelihood for 40% of the world's population and contributes to ~30% of GDP in low income countries (179). It also provides food, fiber, biofuels, and other products for the current human population of 7 billion.

Agriculture provides more than enough calories for all people on the planet, yet 800 million people remain undernourished (50), and approximately two billion suffer from micronutrient deficiencies (164). Furthermore, human populations are projected to grow to nearly 10 billion by 2050 and more than 11 billion by 2100 (167). At the same time, with increasing wealth, there is greater per-capita consumption of meat, refined fats, refined sugars, alcohols, and oils, which are more resource-consuming to produce than crops directly consumed by humans (157). Thus, there is increasing pressure on agriculture to meet the needs of current and future human populations.

Agriculture, however, is already one of the greatest environmental threats (158). Clearing forests and other natural vegetation results in climate change and biodiversity loss. Agriculture is the biggest user of freshwater on this planet, and is the major cause of freshwater eutrophication. Balancing the environmental costs of agriculture with the need to feed current and future populations is a major challenge. This is doubly so, as global environmental changes can feed back, and hamper future production. Climate change is already a major threat to

production, estimated to have caused ~4-5% declines in maize and wheat production over the last 30 years (96).

Many solutions have been proposed for navigating the pathway to a sustainable food system (55). Some scholars advocate for new technological systems, such as genetic modification (51) or vertical farming (37), while others argue for organic agriculture (11) or local food systems (70). Still others argue that agriculture does not need a revolution and that we simply need to improve current farming practices (31). Other arguments shift the focus from farm-level solutions to the entire food supply chain from production to processing to consumption (79), and consider issues such as food waste and diets (88, 157). Some authors question the entire framing of the sustainable food challenge, suggesting food sovereignty as an alternate paradigm (90, 178).

In this paper, we will start by reviewing the major trends in the evolution of agriculture from the Industrial Revolution to the emerging trends and projections for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. As alluded to above, these trends generally depict success in terms of increasing production, but problems of hunger, malnutrition and environmental impacts remain. Accordingly, the remaining sections of this paper address the implications of these land use trends for environmental health and food security, touching on current debates and controversies. We conclude by drawing implications for plant biology. The scope of our review is limited to crops and livestock, and does not consider fisheries or forestry.

## 2. THREE CENTURIES OF EXPANSION – CHANGES SINCE 1700

Humans have modified the Earth's landscapes since time immemorial (125, 138). First through the control of fire, then the domestication of plants and animals, and finally through harnessing the energy from fossil-fuels, humans have greatly expanded their footprint on this planet (166).

But the extent and pace of human land use activities accelerated over the last 300 years (165), with the emergence of the Industrial Revolution and associated rapid growth and transformation of human societies. Between 1700 and 2007, croplands and pasturelands each expanded 5-fold ( ~3 to ~15 and ~5 to ~27 million km<sup>2</sup> respectively, Figure 1). Most cropland expansion replaced forests, while most pastureland expansion replaced grasslands, savannas, and shrublands (Figure 1), with some notable exceptions (e.g, the North American Prairies were replaced by croplands, while a large amount of Latin American deforestation today is still for grazing).

The global expansion of agriculture followed the development of human settlements and the world economy (67, 100, 126). In 1700, large-scale agriculture was mainly confined to the Old World (Figure 2), to Europe, India, China, and Africa (119). European colonization created new settlement frontiers in the Americas, Australasia, and South Africa, while Russians moved east in the Former Soviet Union (67). Between 1850 and 1950, agriculture expanded rapidly in North America, starting on the eastern seaboard and migrating westward over time, and also pushed eastward in the Former Soviet Union (119). However, in the last 50 years, the agricultural frontiers have shifted to the tropics, towards Latin America, Southeast Asia, and Africa (119).

Meanwhile, many temperate regions of the world witnessed stabilization of agricultural lands and even abandonment. In North America, as the agricultural frontier shifted west, croplands were abandoned along the eastern seaboard around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, followed by regeneration of the eastern forests during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (71, 121, 177). Similarly, croplands areas have decreased in China and Western Europe (100). More recently, post-Soviet abandonment of agriculture occurred in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus (133). Some abandonment of agriculture followed by regrowth of forests has also occurred in parts of Latin America, although rapid deforestation continues elsewhere in that continent (2).

### **3. THE GREEN REVOLUTION – CHANGES SINCE 1960**

Despite inexorable agricultural expansion over the past 300 years, clearing has slowed since the 1950s. Thus, while rapid clearing of tropical forests and savannas for agriculture continues (92), these rates are small compared to those affecting temperate latitudes between 1850 and 1950 (Figure 2).

Despite reduced clearing rates, and reduced agricultural land area per-capita globally, our agricultural lands have continued to provide food and other agricultural products for the rapidly rising human population. Indeed, cereal production per capita increased from 0.29 to 0.39 tonnes per person between 1961 and 2014 (49) as a result of increasing productivity of land over time. The “Green Revolution” is the term commonly used to denote the suite of technologies that enabled crop yields (i.e., crop production per unit area) to increase rapidly since the 1950s.

### **3.1. The package deal: seeds, water, nutrients, machinery**

The increased productivity of land was enabled by a suite of technological advances that can broadly be divided into three categories. First, advances in plant biology improved our understanding of genetics, development, and physiology, and their relationship to crop performance. Plant breeders were able to develop new varieties of crops with desirable traits such as dwarfing, high yields, and increased resistance to pests and diseases (45). These new “high yield varieties” of maize, wheat, and rice were rapidly developed and deployed around the world in the 1950s and 1960s (45) (Figure 3), albeit with bias toward certain world regions (Latin America and Asia, but not the Middle East or Africa).

Evenson and Gollin (46) conducted an exhaustive study of the impact of international agricultural research on the development, diffusion, and influence of modern crop varieties over 1960 to 2000. They found that more than 8000 modern varieties had been released for 11 major crops by 2000. With the exception of wheat, farmer adoption of new cultivars occurred soon after their release (with the notable exception of Sub-Saharan Africa). Remarkably, the use of modern varieties accounted for 21% of the growth in yields in the early phase of the Green Revolution in all developing countries between 1961 and 1980, and nearly 50% of the growth in yield in the late phase from 1981 to 2000.

The second major advance was the development of the Haber-Bosch process, which permitted synthesis of nitrogen fertilizer from the plentiful nitrogen available in the atmosphere. This

discovery was a major breakthrough for agriculture as nitrogen is a major limiting nutrient in soils. The application of additional nutrients, in combination with irrigation, pesticides, and new crop varieties, led to a major boost in crop productivity (45). Total fertilizer use quadrupled during 1961-2014, with the biggest increases in Asia (and also through much of the rest of the world), but with little increases in Africa (Figure 4). It has been estimated that 40-60% of yields in the USA and England (and much higher proportions in the tropics) are attributable to commercial fertilizers (148). More than a quarter of the world population over the past century is estimated to have been fed by synthetic nitrogen fertilizers (44).

The third major advance was the harnessing of energy from fossil fuels, which enabled other technological advances, including vast improvements in the mechanization of agriculture, as well as the production of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides. These developments, coupled with low (subsidized) energy costs, allowed farmers to efficiently exploit (and over-exploit) groundwater resources. Over the 1961-2014 period, the global area equipped for irrigation doubled, from 0.16 billion ha (12% of cropland) to 0.33 billion ha (21% of cropland) (Figure 4). Asia contributed predominantly (75%) to this growth. Irrigated yields were 1.6 times higher than rainfed yields during 1988-2002, and 24% of the total harvested area that was irrigated contributed to 33% of the total production (136).

Irrigation also enabled farmers to extend the growing season into the dry season. Coupled with new shorter-season varieties of crops, farmers were able to increase production through multiple cropping of existing cropland (34). Total harvested land area (i.e., area counted twice



when two crops are grown in a season) increased faster than standing cropland area during the 1961-2011 period (34). For example, double-cropped area in Brazil's Mato Grosso increased six-fold from roughly 0.5 to 2.9 million hectares between 2001 and 2011 (141). On the global level, these increases in harvest intensity contributed to 9% of production growth during 1961-2007 (5).

In summary, the Green Revolution was a package deal of new seeds and new inputs, made possible by the availability of cheap energy.

### **3.2. Changes in crop types and crop yields**

While the Green Revolution led to general increases in crop yields, there is massive variation in how yields, harvested area, and production changed across different crop types (Figure 5). For some crops we saw marked yield increases. Maize yield in the USA remained around 1.7 tonnes/ha from 1866 to 1935, but has since increased to ~10 tonnes/ha (168); similarly wheat yield in the UK remained around 2 tonnes/ha until the 1930s, but has increased since to ~8 tonnes/ha today (6).

Since 1961, the biggest production increases have occurred in oil crops (8-fold increase) – especially oil palm, rapeseed and soy – due to increases in both harvested area and yields (Figure 5). In contrast, production increases in major cereals – rice, wheat, and maize—occurred through yield increases, and saw little change in harvested area. The minor cereal crops (e.g. sorghum, millet) decreased in harvested area by 31% between 1961 and 2014. Yet their total

production increased by 33%, reflecting a 93% increase in yields per hectare. While most crops increased production between 1961 and 2014, a few did not, such as oats whose production declined by 54%.

Green Revolution yield increases have not continued apace everywhere. Overall, for 24-39% of maize, rice, wheat, and soy growing regions of the world (for example, maize in Kansas, wheat in France, and rice in Nigeria), yields either never improved, stagnated or collapsed (124), with the situation being worse for food crops (rice, wheat) versus fodder crops (maize and soy).

Based on this information, current yield trends were estimated to be insufficient to meet the needs of the future (123), although this is debated (77) as discussed further in Section 7.1. One important potential reason for yield stagnation is climate change, which is estimated to have decreased maize and wheat production by 3.8% and 5.5%, respectively over the 1980-2008 period (96). However, stagnating yields could also be attributed to a multitude of other reasons including loss of soil fertility and salinization, cultivars approaching yield potentials, pest and disease buildup, water scarcity, and policies supporting environmental outcomes over yields (124).

Another important trend to consider is changes in crop yield variability from year to year, as more volatile crop yields can lead to unstable farmer incomes and price hikes affecting consumers. Recent estimates suggest that year-to-year variability in climate accounted for roughly a third of the observed year-to-year variability in yields between 1979 and 2008 (122). But, at the global scale, there is no strong and clear pattern that crop yields have become more

volatile over time (78, 109), although statistically significant increases in yield variability were detected in 9-22% of maize, rice, wheat, and soy harvested areas over the 1981-2010 period (78). There is some evidence that climate trends are partly responsible for these increases in yield variability (78, 109).

### **3.3. Trends in crop diversity**

Large swaths of agricultural land currently operate under monocultures or monoculture rotations, with double or triple crops per year (29). Increases in farm size in upper income countries (97), and preponderance of monoculture suggests that spatial diversity of cropping has also declined at the landscape level (e.g. 1). Further, a number of studies suggest that the industrial agricultural transition led to a reduction in area cropped with traditional varieties (111). Nevertheless, farmers in traditional agro-ecosystems often maintain high varietal and species diversity on their farms and across communities and regions, although this is higher for staple than non-staple crops (82).

The current hotspots of crop diversity are concentrated in Europe, Africa, Asia, and West South America, with low diversity in Australia, North America, and South America (74). A global map of the major crop belts highlights specialized locations for particular crop groups, such as major cereals, and luxury crops such as cocoa and coffee (Figure 6). Historically genetic diversity has been eroded by domestication of wild crop precursors (17) and major concern exists for the erosion of wild types and crop genetic resources of the world today (30). However, meta-

analysis suggests that in recent decades genetic diversity of breeder varieties does not show clear downward trends (169).

### **3.4. Trends in livestock intensification**

Alongside the Green Revolution, there was also a 'livestock revolution', which largely occurred as a result of people consuming more animal products as they get richer. Since incomes are increasing faster in low-income countries, which also often have higher rates of human population growth, accelerated growth in animal numbers has taken place (35). In 2014, the world had 23.4 billion poultry birds, 1.7 billion cattle and buffaloes, 2.2 billion sheep and goats, and 0.9 billion pigs (49). The global stocks of chickens and pigs increased at a faster pace than human population between 1960 and 2000, by a factor of 5 and 2.5, respectively (63). The number of cattle and buffaloes and sheep and goats have increased by 62% and 64% respectively between 1961 and 2014 (Figure 7). The largest increases were witnessed in Asia and Africa (Figure 7).

In addition to increases in animal numbers, significant livestock intensification has also taken place. This has largely been achieved by increasing animal densities, production units, the use of concentrated feeds, pharmaceuticals and vaccinations, and improved efficiencies (63). Globally, 62% less land and 46% less GHG emissions are used now to produce one kilocalorie from livestock than was used in 1961. This intensification of production has occurred at the expense of an 188% increase in nitrogen use for increasing feed production (89). A shift from ruminants to more intensive pig and poultry production has been partly responsible for this trade-off;

intensive systems need less land and fewer livestock implies less methane emissions, but increased feed requirements imply more nitrogen fertilizer use. Collectively, livestock intensification has resulted in about 36% of the calories produced on global croplands being diverted to animal feed (28), and the rise in livestock numbers have generated large concentrations of animal wastes (see Section 3.5).

Intensification of livestock has nevertheless occurred at different rates in different parts of the world and in some cases has led to reductions in animal numbers. For example, the US produces 60% more milk with 80% fewer cows now than in the 1940s (25). Significant intensification and also growth of the livestock sector has occurred primarily in Latin America and Asia. This is in stark contrast with Sub-Saharan Africa, where productivity per animal has remained stagnant for decades, and all the growth in the sector has occurred due to increases in animal numbers.

### **3.5. Separation of crops and livestock**

Mixed crop-livestock systems are a traditional form of agriculture that remains predominant in most smallholder and subsistence farming systems in developing countries (73). The integration of crops and livestock offers many management benefits. Animals can deliver nutrient-rich manures for the crops and draft power for bed preparation, while crops and their residues can be used for forage (73). Mixed-crop livestock systems are nevertheless on the decline in many parts of the world (114, 131). This separation of cropping and livestock systems has increased the problem of manure waste management, increased the need to import feed in livestock

systems, and for chemical fertilizers in cropping systems. Recoupling livestock and cropping systems offers a major path to sustainable management in agriculture (73). In sub-Saharan Africa, such recoupling has the potential to nearly close the nutrient cycle, returning up to 80% of the nutrients extracted by crops back into the soil system (142). However, while mixed crop-livestock systems offer many benefits, they also require higher capital to establish and can be extremely difficult to manage (153).

#### **4. EMERGING TRENDS AND FUTURE PROJECTIONS**

It is clear that the Green Revolution was a major success in terms of increasing crop production. Crop production has more than kept pace with population growth over the last 50 years, with cereal production per capita increasing from 0.29 to 0.39 tonnes per person between 1961 and 2014, even while human populations more than doubled from 3 billion in 1961 to 7 billion in 2014. However, many questions for the future remain unanswered. Will agriculture be able to keep pace with future population demand? Will we reach peak cropland? And where might we expect future productivity gains to come from?

##### **4.1. Projections of future production and demand**

With rising human populations and increasing per-capita wealth, the demand for food, feed, and other agricultural products is expected to increase in the future. There are two major studies that have projected future demand to 2050. Alexandratos and Bruinsma from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) projected that aggregate agricultural production (of all crop and livestock products) will increase 60% by 2050, compared to a 2005/2007 baseline (5). But

this aggregate is difficult to interpret since it includes multiple dissimilar products that are weighted by international prices (5, 161). Alexandratos and Bruinsma also estimated demand for different commodity groups on a tonnage basis, and found that between 2005/2007 and 2050, global demand for meat production and sugarcane & sugarbeet production will increase by 76%, oilcrop production by 90%, and cereal production by 50%.

David Tilman and colleagues also projected future food demand to 2050 using future projections of population growth and GDP coupled with income-dependent estimates of per-capita crop demand (155, 157). Their analysis projected a 100% increase in global demand for calories and a 110% increase in protein by 2050 (155). It is difficult to compare the aggregate figures from Tilman et al. with those from Alexandratos and Bruinsma, because of the different units (calories versus value-weighted production) used by these studies.

However, as we will discuss in section 7.1, several recent studies challenge these estimates of future food demand. Current trends should not necessarily be a guide to the future. Diets heavy in meat, oils, and sugars are a major contributor to the global health burdens of diabetes, cancer, and heart disease (157), and future realization of these negative impacts may cause demand to be much lower than projected. Policies that promote greater dietary reliance on grains, fruits, vegetables and dairy would in turn also alter future demand on global agriculture.

#### **4.2. Will we reach peak cropland?**

Peak cropland is a term used to describe a time when humanity might reach its most extensive use of the earth's land surface area for agriculture. A recent study (8) suggested this might occur soon. Analyzing historical trends, they showed a reduction in rates of cropland expansion over 1961-2010, with expansions of 0.24% per year over the whole of 1961-2010, but only 0.04% per year during 1995-2010. They showed that this was a result of rising yields and relatively slower growth in consumption (than expected based on changing affluence) countering increased pressure on croplands from growth in population and affluence. Projecting forward, they showed possible scenarios whereby cropland areas would peak and then decline. This projection of peak cropland requires slower diet shifts toward meat consumption and the abandonment of biofuels or other non-food uses of crops (8). It is debatable whether these projections are realistic.

But whether cropland actually peaks or not, the FAO study of Alexandratos and Bruinsma (5) supports the slowdown of cropland expansion. Recent historical trends suggests that 77% of increased production over the 1961-2005 period came from increased yields, 14% from expansion of croplands, and 9% from increases in cropping intensity (5). Looking forward into 2050, they projected that 80% of future production growth will come from yield growth, and 10% each from cropland expansion and increases in cropping intensity (5). This suggests that the contribution of cropland expansion to production growth is expected to reduce by ~4% in the future.



Notwithstanding projections of future cropland, for environmental reasons it is imperative that we slow cropland expansion, as most of the new lands available for clearing are in the tropics and of high carbon and biodiversity value (120). The threat of climate change is an especially important reason to avoid deforestation for agriculture (52).

#### **4.3. Future growth through improvements in efficiency**

Increases in crop productivity since the Green Revolution have been driven in part by increases in external inputs (e.g., water and nutrients). However, increasingly, some of the improvements in productivity are being driven by improvements in the efficiency of input use. Agricultural economists use the concept of ‘total factor productivity’ (TFP) to examine the efficiency of input use. A recent study (57) estimated that since 1990 overall contributions to global agricultural output has switched from input intensification (growth due to addition of new land, irrigation, labour, machinery, etc) to improvements in TFP (more output per input).

Future increases in TFP can be sustained by further increases in input efficiency - getting ‘more crop per drop’ of fertilizers or water. Economists argue that past successes have resulted from high investments in research and development in agricultural technology, such as witnessed in Brazil and China in recent decades (57). Precision agriculture (PA) and variable rate applications of inputs can increase efficiencies by applying nutrients and inputs where they are required to achieve the best productivity gains on a given piece of land (99). However, the cost of obtaining information to enable TFP increases through PA are high (23), and has slowed adoption (19). Other potential opportunities to increase TFP exist through ecological intensification (e.g. 68),

conventional breeding, or genetic engineering approaches, although economic gains from these advances are not always clear (e.g. 128).

## **5. IMPLICATIONS FOR ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH**

### **5.1. Forest loss and fragmentation**

Agriculture is responsible for converting ~30% of forests worldwide (118). From 1980-2000, more than half of new agricultural land in the tropics came from deforestation of intact forests, and just under a third from disturbed forest (61). Globally between 2000-2010, it is thought that 80% of deforestation resulted from conversion to agriculture and grazing lands (84). Just two countries, Indonesia and Brazil, were responsible for over 50% of this tropical forest loss (10). Agriculture has also massively fragmented forests, with large stretches of natural habitat, such as the Brazilian Atlantic Forest, now existing in degraded fragments of <1000 ha in size, all within 1km of the forest edge (69).

### **5.2. Greenhouse gas emissions**

Agriculture, including deforestation and land use change, currently contributes ~22% of global greenhouse gas emissions (GHGe) (140). Around 9% of GHGe (4.3 – 5.5 GtCO<sub>2</sub> eq/yr) comes from ongoing deforestation and land conversion (140). The conversion of tropical forests to cropland releases about three times more carbon into the atmosphere compared to temperate forests (176). GHGe from agriculture have changed over time and space as a result of land use regime shifts. For example, in the great plains of North America, conversion of prairie habitat

and plowing were the greatest contributors of GHGe in earlier times, but livestock are now the largest emitters (110). Globally today, agricultural management on already converted lands are thought to make up ~13% of GHGe (5.0 – 5.8 GtCO<sub>2</sub> eq / yr). Over a third of this results from CH<sub>4</sub> from enteric fermentation, ~15% from N<sub>2</sub>O emissions from manure and synthetic fertilizer application, and ~12% from CH<sub>4</sub> in rice paddies (140). Like carbon losses from deforestation, management-based emissions are concentrated geographically in particular hotspots: CH<sub>4</sub> enteric fermentation largely occurs in India, sub-Saharan Africa, Brazil and W. Europe (72), while more than 50% of all N<sub>2</sub>O emissions from nutrient application is from China, India and the USA (175), and ~60% of CH<sub>4</sub> from rice is emitted by India, China and Vietnam (26).

### **5.3. Biodiversity loss**

Agriculture affects biodiversity through habitat replacement and management choices on converted lands. Across biomes and taxonomic groups, conversion to pasture and cropland results in losses of ~20-30% of local species richness (106). Biodiversity loss is non-random, with marked declines in functionally important species in ecosystems, such as large bodied pollinators (91). In the tropics, species losses have shown to be persistent after abandonment of agricultural lands (62). Fragmentation breaks down essential plant-animal interactions required for regeneration and persistence of native vegetation (105), and causes species diversity to erode over time beyond initial disturbance events (69).

In addition to habitat loss and fragmentation, agricultural management impacts biodiversity through management choices such as use of pesticides, fertilizers, and crop choice.

Fertilization, from nitrogen-fixing legumes and application of manure and synthetic fertilizers, has contributed to a global increase in nitrogen (N) flow (172). This results in species loss in terrestrial (146) and freshwater environments (103). The longest running experiment of N addition at Rothamsted Research station in the UK shows that plant diversity rebounds after reductions in N application, although it is unclear if recovery is possible in other systems (149). Intense management, which includes tillage and short rotations, also negatively affects soil biodiversity and food web structure (162).

Pesticide application has also been linked to declines in populations of non-target plants and insects (20), and the development, foraging patterns, and effectiveness of bees and natural enemies of crop pests (36, 143). Conversely, management options to increase the diversity of cropping systems have been shown to improve both the abundance of natural enemies (94), and species diversity and yield contributions of pollinators (58). Organic agriculture typically has higher species richness than conventional systems across a range of taxonomic groups (163), but lower yields make it less efficient for local species richness on a per-unit product basis than conventional systems (135). However, crop diversification closes the yield gap between organic and conventional systems (115), suggesting that this trade-off is dependent on management of crop choice and scheduling of rotations.

#### **5.4. Soil health**

The impact of agriculture on soils is tightly linked to land use change and agricultural management. The alteration of vegetative cover, through replacement of forests or grasslands

with annual crops, influences infiltration, erosion, and organic matter inputs. Three major soil erosion linked agricultural transitions have occurred – the expansion of river-based populations up forested slopes around 2000 BE, the invention of sharp plough and deep tillage in 16<sup>th</sup>-19<sup>th</sup> Century, and crop expansion into tropical biomes after World War II (101). It is estimated that by 1990 ~15% of the world's soils were in some way degraded (108). Current rates of erosion on agricultural land are estimated to be ~35 Pg yr<sup>-1</sup> (28 Pg yr<sup>-1</sup> from water, ~5Pg yr<sup>-1</sup> from tillage and ~2 Pg yr<sup>-1</sup> from wind) (117) – rates that are an order of magnitude higher than that of natural erosion or soil formation processes (151). Land clearing for agriculture has also led to soil degradation through other means, with vegetation removal in semi-arid Western Australia resulting in recharging of ground water at two orders of magnitude above the background rate, causing water tables to rise, and salinization of ~10% of agricultural lands in the region (60).

The management of soils, through fertilization, tillage, grazing, crop type and rotation planning, also has had marked influence on soil health. The loss of soil organic matter, which results from replenishing soil nutrients with synthetic mineral fertilizers (N-P-K) without replenishing organic material, has pushed agricultural systems into a state of rapid nutrient cycling with high rates of nutrient loss (98). This, in combination with shorter rotations and loss of cover crops, has led to increases in soil borne pathogens (171), increases in crop susceptibility to droughts (33), and crop yield declines (15).

## **5.5. Water use & quality**

Agricultural production accounts for 92% of the human water footprint, ~77% of which can be attributed to rainfed agricultural systems (76). Twelve percent of agricultural water footprint is in freshwater, with irrigation accounting for ~64% of withdrawals worldwide (41). Agricultural water use has had catastrophic impacts on freshwater resources, for example, the complete loss of the 68,000 km<sup>2</sup> of the Aral sea at the end of the last century (102), and groundwater depletion crises in North West India (127).

Importantly, water use in production systems is concentrated in space and by crop type. China, India, Pakistan and the USA account for ~68% of irrigated water used, half by India alone, with rice and wheat covering ~69% of irrigated area and consuming ~54% of irrigated water globally (175).

In addition to effects on quantity used, loading of nutrients (27), pesticides (4), and livestock antibiotics (83) from agriculture all have negative effects on water quality, and pose public health problems for humans. Phosphorous and nitrogen fertilizer pollution in particular is notorious for forcing algal blooms and anoxic dead zones in both freshwater (27) and coastal marine systems (39), which kill fish and reduce the palatability of drinking water for human consumption.

## **5.6. Summary of environmental impacts**

Greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity loss, soil degradation, and water impacts of agriculture all negatively feedback and reduce the benefits that can be received from the food system. For

example, agricultural greenhouse gas emissions contribute to an increase in extreme events (40) and global crop production losses (93), soil erosion is leading to declines in crop productivity (151) and pollinator declines threaten yields of increasingly pollination-dependent cropping choices (116). These negative feedbacks within agriculture represent significant long-term financial and business risks. While humans have become more environmentally efficient on a per capita basis at producing food (e.g. 16), in aggregate these negative effects of agriculture are a major concern for both the future of agriculture and for the safe operating space for humanity on our planet (144).

## **6. IMPLICATIONS FOR FOOD SECURITY**

### **6.1. More production, more calories, but less nutrition**

The Green Revolution was a massive success in terms of producing calories for humanity. Average available calories per person from crop and livestock production increased from 2196 kcal day<sup>-1</sup> per person in 1961 to 2884 kcal day<sup>-1</sup> per person in 2013. There was more than enough energy available in 2013 to supply every person on the planet (49).

However, this energy is not distributed evenly and is not as nutritious as it could be. While the U.S.A. had ~3680 kcal day<sup>-1</sup> per person available in 2013, the Central African Republic had only half, ~1880 kcal day<sup>-1</sup> per person. The number of undernourished in the world remains unacceptably high, with ~795 million people still lacking sufficient calories in the world today (50). Furthermore, 2 billion suffer from iron deficiencies (164). Deficiencies in iron and other

micronutrients such as iodine, folate, Vitamin A and zinc, are particularly important for human growth and are together associated with a range of pathologies, including cognitive impairment, anemia, blindness, and pregnancy complications (164).

A new problem exists today. From 1975-2014, the world transitioned from a state in which the prevalence of underweight was double that of obesity, to one in which more people are obese than underweight (38). Currently around 37% of the world's population is overweight or obese (107), carrying a heavy burden of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, and morbidity (150).

The global reliance on very few crops for energy, with some 84% of calories globally coming from just 17 crops (175) is a primary reason for the human nutrition gap. This is most clearly demonstrated by the South/South-East Asian regions which have micronutrient deficiency prevalences of ~30%, due to dominance of white rice in the diet (13). Moreover, in some regions, marked declines in micronutrient density in diets have taken place in recent decades with shifts away from fruits, nuts, and pulses toward calorie-dense but nutrient-poor foods (e.g. maize, rice, wheat, vegetable oils), such as in Sub-Saharan Africa during 1979 -1993 (13). Worryingly there have also been downward trends in the nutritional quality of crops, with declines for some items observed in U.S.A. between 1950 and 1999, due to optimization for increased yield (32). The world produces 22% less fruits and vegetables than required to meet the World Health Organization recommendation to consume five portions of fruits and vegetables per day to achieve a healthy diet (137).



## **6.2. More production, more calories, but access remains the bottleneck**

A recent study found that improvements in caloric supply was not the main cause of improvements in child nutritional status over 1970-2012 (139); instead, dietary diversity, sanitation, clean water, and women's education were equally or more important drivers. The prevalence of malnutrition despite sufficient caloric availability at the national and global levels led the Food and Agricultural Organization of the UN to revise their definition of food insecurity in 1996 to include availability, access, utilization, and stability (48). Purchasing power is a central component of access, and reliable cash transfer programs have been shown to increase the quality and quantity of food in diets of the poor (159), as has off-farm income for smallholders (56). Globally there is an inverse relationship between GDP and the proportion of labor force in agriculture (152) — and this lack of purchasing power means that predominantly farming countries are typically food insecure. Currently 69% of the world's farms exist in Southeast Asia, South Asia and Sub-saharan Africa (97), with 30% of their produce coming from holdings <2ha in size (74). Economists have suggested that the solution to economic development is agricultural development, but the directionality of this relationship on the national level is widely context dependent (9). The urban environment brings new access opportunities (134), but malnutrition remains prevalent in populations of the urban poor (132). It has been widely documented that populations that exist in perpetual states of caloric and nutritional food insecurity from poverty limited access are also often those that are most at risk for acute food insecurity from extreme climate events or political disasters (12).

### **6.3. More production, but less stability**

It has been suggested that intensive crop production systems might be more fragile than less intensive systems (93). Some evidence exists at the regional scale that maize yields (but not wheat or rice) follow Taylor's power law, with the variance in crop yields increasing non-linearly with increases in yield (14). However maize cultivar trials do not support the existence of a trade-off between yield and stability (160). High input systems, with nutrient and water additions, also provide a fundamental means to decouple growth from external stressors, and protect, at least in the short term, against environmental water stress (24) or nutrient exhaustion (104). Pollinator dependent plants typically display higher production instability than non-pollination dependent crops (59), which suggests stability benefits for agricultural systems due to decoupling from nature. The increase in pollination dependency (3), could therefore be destabilizing production. However, the benefits of decoupling from nature may fail when systems are pushed to their limits, such as under extreme weather events (95), or, over the long-term, when intensified practices lead to ecosystem degradation (156) which negatively feedback onto crops.

An alternative perspective is to develop diversified farming systems that rely on a diversity of ecosystem service providers for production and stability (85, 87). Ecological theory and experiments suggest that it is possible to obtain high yields and reduce production variability simultaneously (80). While diversification practices have remained at the sidelines of agricultural development, the few local scale tests of diversified agro-ecological systems suggest stability benefits: with evidence that polycultures increase the temporal stability of

yields (64), increase pollination (58), and decrease losses to pests (81). Facilitation between plants is maximized under environmental stress (22), suggesting that diversified systems might actually increase their adaptive capacity under extreme shocks (87, 95). Nevertheless, while there is some evidence that polycultures may increase supply stability by providing portfolio effects and increasing nutrient and water use efficiencies (21, 80), widespread adoption on large scale farms has not yet taken place. Links between crop biodiversity and stability at higher levels of organization (e.g. national, regional, or global levels) have not yet been made empirically.

## **7. CURRENT DEBATES**

In this section we review some of the major ongoing debates in the agriculture, food security, and environmental literature.

### **7.1. Challenging the doubling narrative**

In section 4.1, we reviewed two future projections of crop production to 2050: a 60% growth in aggregate production in dollar-weighted terms from a 2005/2007 baseline, and a 100-110% increase in calories/protein demand from a 2005 baseline. These studies have resulted in a general tendency in the literature to suggest that a “doubling” of food production is needed by 2050 (54, 123, 154).

Several recent papers have challenged this narrative. Tomlinson (161), referring to an older FAO estimate of 70% increase by 2050, pointed out that it was not a normative estimate (desirable production in 2050), but rather a projection of the most likely future according to the authors. Moreover, she pointed out that the FAO estimate is not of production or calories, but of dollar-weighted aggregate production (also excluding fruit and vegetables). Alexandratos and Bruinsma take pains to make the same point in their updated 2012 report (5). Another recent study also critiqued the doubling narrative for ignoring baselines (77), pointing that the baseline for both the FAO and Tilman studies was ~2005, and that production growth experienced since then actually suggests only a 25%-70% increase is needed between 2014 and 2050.

## **7.2. Land sparing versus land sharing**

Land sparing is the idea that intensifying agricultural production, and thereby growing the same amount of food on less agricultural land, can spare land for nature. The idea goes back to Norman Borlaug, the Father of the Green Revolution, who estimated in an Editorial (18) that 1.2 billion hectares of land had been spared from cultivation between 1950 and 2000 because of yield increases over that period. Waggoner (173, 174) also had proposed the same idea in the 1990s in an article titled “How much land can 10 billion people spare for nature?”.

While the idea that agricultural intensification could promote nature conservation by land sparing originally came from agricultural scientists, it was picked up by conservation biologists in the 2000s. In a widely known article (66), Rhys Green, Andrew Balmford, and colleagues proposed a theoretical model to examine the tradeoffs between food production and

biodiversity conservation. Their model suggested that the nature of the tradeoff is determined by how the densities of wild species and crop yields respond to intensification. Their proposal has been widely criticized since (53, 65, 170).

One major criticism of land sparing is that agricultural intensification does not actually result in land sparing in practice, because intensification generally results in more farmers adopting the practice, resulting in increased (and not decreased) clearing for cropland (7). Two studies (47, 130) conducted global empirical assessments and found no evidence for land sparing in practice. However, neither study constructed a proper counterfactual to examine what might have happened in the absence of the Green Revolution (75). Two recent studies that used an economic modeling framework to construct a counterfactual concluded that the historical Green Revolution did result in land sparing (75, 147). However, whether the spared land actually resulted in nature conservation remains an open question (86, 113). Land sparing initiatives need to be coupled with appropriate policies to ensure that conservation actually takes place (86, 113).

### **7.3. Genetic engineering versus organic farming**

Another widespread and passionate debate in the scientific community is on the role of Genetically Modified (GM) foods versus organic farming in navigating pathways to sustainable food systems (55). As labeling of GM foods is still not common in most countries, organic, by expressly prohibiting GM, has set itself up as the only product that ensures that consumers can have non-GM food. There is especially a wide gap between scientific and public perceptions of

GM foods (112). While both approaches could have important roles to play in different circumstances (129), the two communities have continuously clashed.

#### **7.4. Sustainable diets**

Until recently, the predominant focus of agricultural science was on supply-side solutions to meeting the sustainable food security challenge. But a spate of recent papers have pointed to the necessity and enormous leverage of demand-side solutions (e.g., 28, 43, 54, 145, 157). For example, Erb et al. explored 500 different future scenarios for feeding the world in 2050 that would also avoid further deforestation. They found feasible or probably feasible biophysical options in nearly two-thirds of their scenarios, but all required either cropland intensification or a shift to plant-based diets. There was no scenario that permitted low-yielding agriculture along with meat-based diets. Cassidy et al. estimated that shifting the current mix of crops away from biofuels and animal feed would itself increase global calories by 70%. They also calculated that this is roughly equivalent to all the yield gains seen in maize, wheat, and rice during 1965-2009; in other words, shifting to vegan diets would be as powerful for increasing food availability as was the historical Green Revolution. Relative to scenarios, less extreme shifts toward reducing meat consumption, waste, and the demand for non-food agricultural products (e.g., cotton) could greatly reduce the environmental impacts of the food system (54).

### **8. CONCLUSIONS: IMPLICATIONS FOR PLANT BIOLOGY**

Humans have fundamentally transformed global landscapes and shaped the distribution of plant life on Earth through agriculture. While advances in production of food over recent

decades have kept pace with human population growth, these advances have come at a cost to both the environment and human health. Direct negative feedbacks to agricultural systems from environmental degradation now threaten long-term agricultural productivity. Coordinated research programs are needed to steer humanity into a safe operating space for agriculture. This will require conjoined efforts across many different disciplines within plant biology, and collaborations between subject areas that have to date remained *pedagogically* and *ideologically* separate.

A major challenge facing plant biologists is the joining of modern breeding approaches (including genomic selection and genomic engineering) with agro-ecological farming practices. The ‘package deal’ of seeds, fertilizers and energy that enabled the Green Revolution, was a massive success for increasing production of a few key crops. New modern varieties from industry have been successful in increasing shelf life and catering to consumer tastes and preferences. We now need a new package deal for the future – that is optimized across different environmental, social, and health outcomes. This will require investment into understanding how diversified farming systems can be made financially competitive with the current monocultures that dominate large swaths of the planet, not only by developing plant materials that assist in producing sustainable, multi-functional agriculture, but also by developing appropriate policies that promote positive environmental, social, and health outcomes.

Breeding for agro-ecological farming practices, including intercropping, perennial systems, and increased soil biodiversity, should be directed toward multifunctionality in cropping systems (e.g. simultaneous yield stability, microclimate control, erosion control, water use efficiency, nutrient use efficiency, reduced pollution, and increased pest control). There is a further need to join these efforts with modern innovations in breeding of climate smart seeds, in improving photosynthetic efficiency (introducing C<sub>4</sub> metabolism into C<sub>3</sub> crops), nitrogen fixation, increasing nutritional content (i.e. for improved protein and micronutrient supply to humans and livestock), and disease resistance. Such innovations can help avert yield stagnation, adapt to changes in the growing season and extreme weather events, close the micronutrient gap, and decrease food waste.

Co-ordinated efforts are required to bring together diverse research programs in agro-ecology and plant breeding, reduce agriculture's negative impacts on the environment, and ensure food security, at local, to national, regional and global levels. This will require re-orientation of public and private funding to support the R&D needed for sustainable agriculture. It will also require input from farmers and consumers to design systems to be socially relevant for effective knowledge transfer and adoption, and maximum impact. History provides the proof that this is possible – the Green Revolution brought coordinated international efforts across governments and research institutes to increase productivity, fundamentally shaping human civilizations and the functioning of the planet as we know it. It is time plant biologists use the lessons learnt from the historical trends and outcomes of agricultural land use to design the next wave of



research geared towards developing both productive and sustainable agricultural systems in the future.

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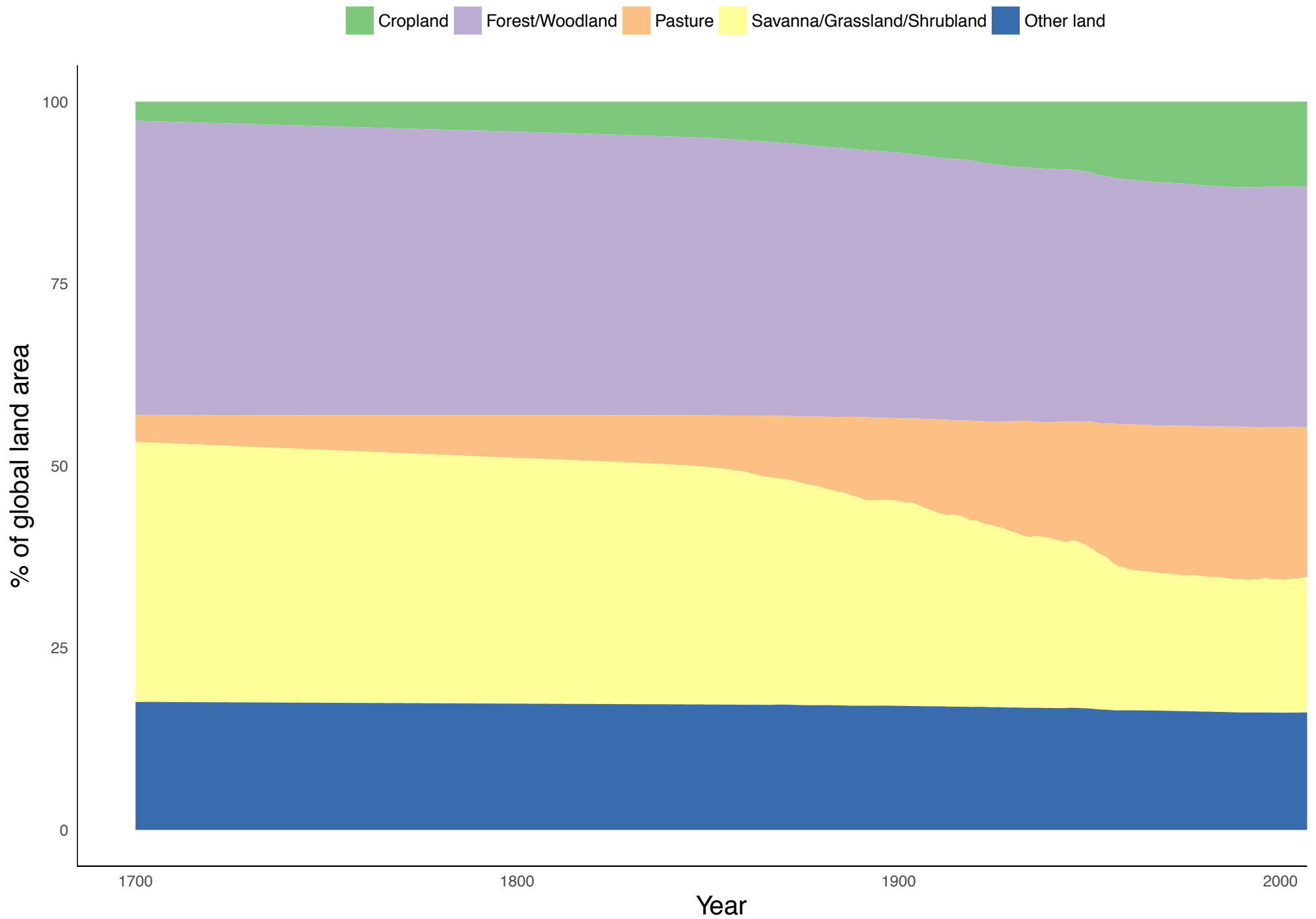


Figure 1. Global land cover trends from 1700 to 2007. Estimates of cropland and pasture area are based on historical reconstructions using methods described by (27) and (2). Cropland and pasture area were overlaid on a map of global potential natural vegetation (27) to estimate changes in the other land cover categories.

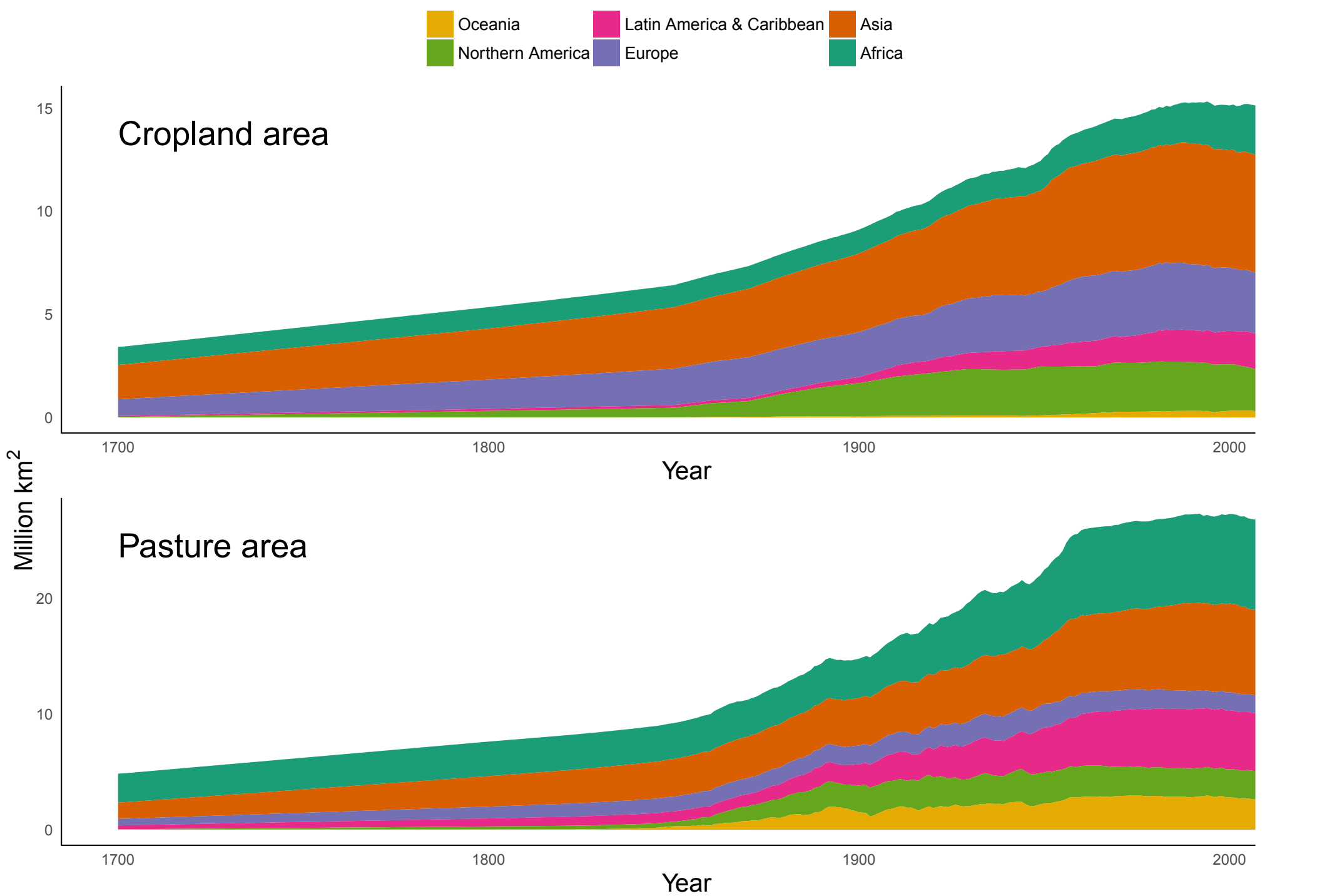


Figure 2. Regional trends in cropland and pasture area from 1700 to 2007. Estimates of cropland and pasture area are based on historical reconstructions using methods described by (27) and (2).

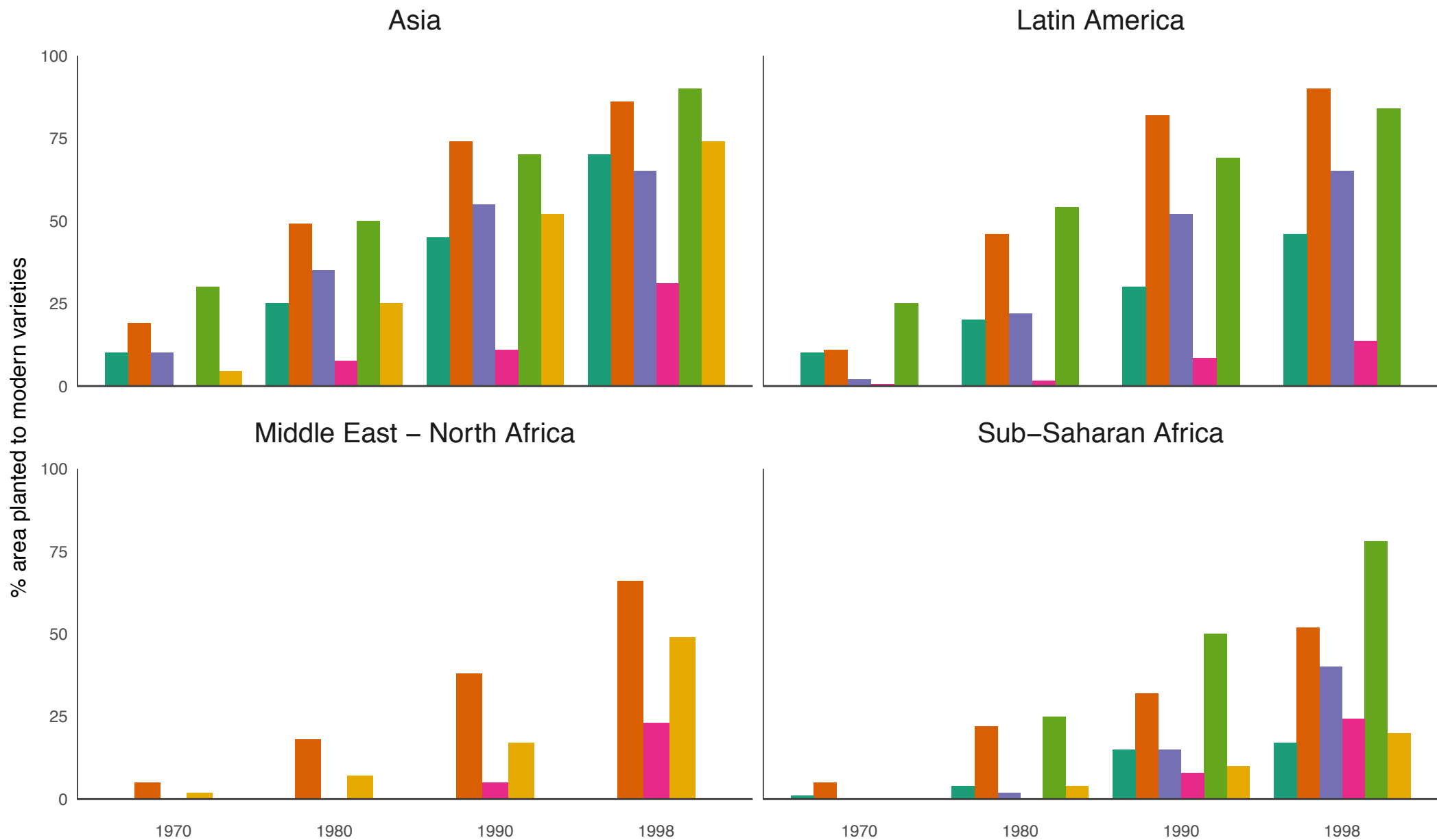
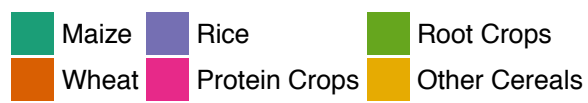


Figure 3. The adoption of modern varieties around the world. Figure adapted from (35), using data presented in (36).

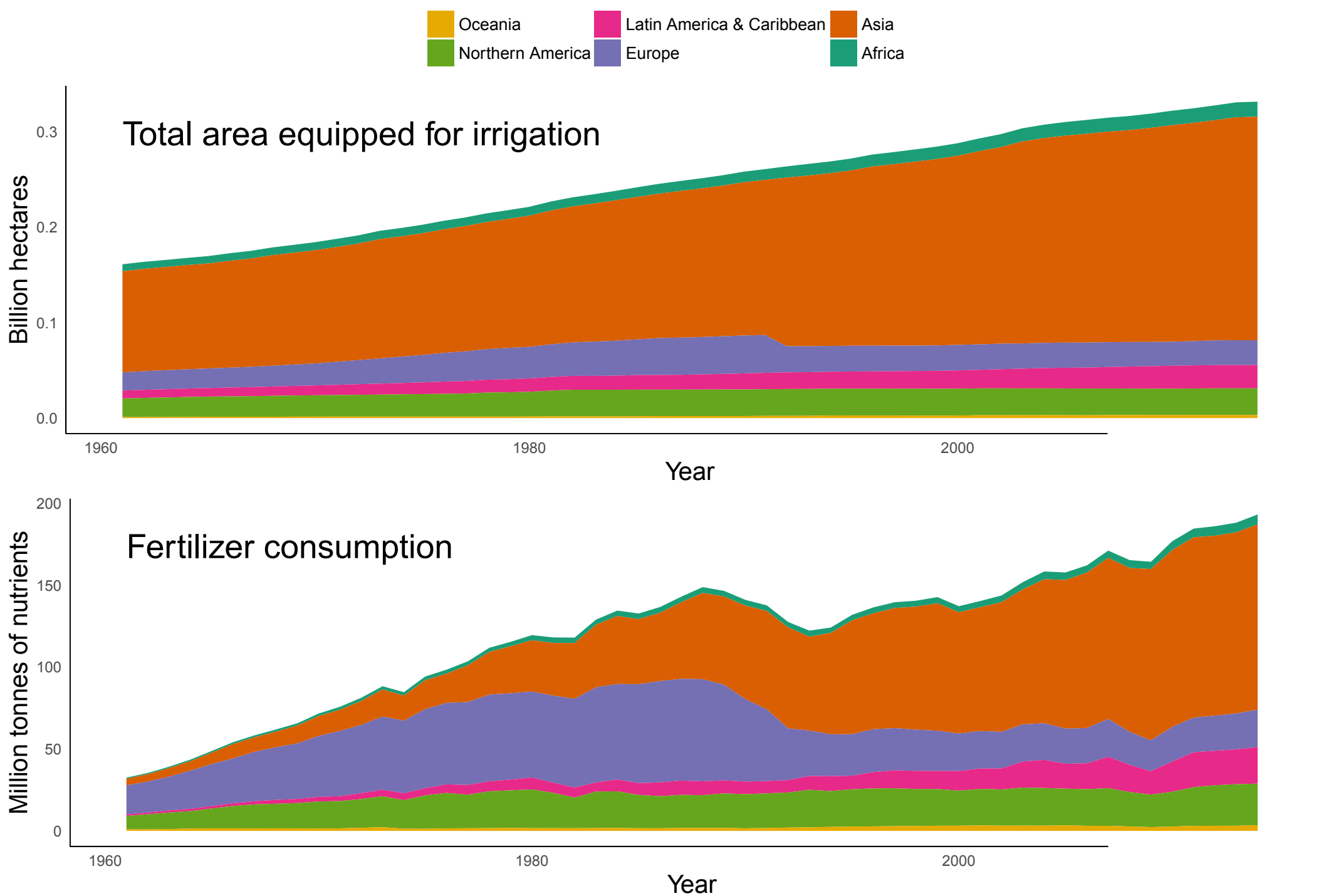
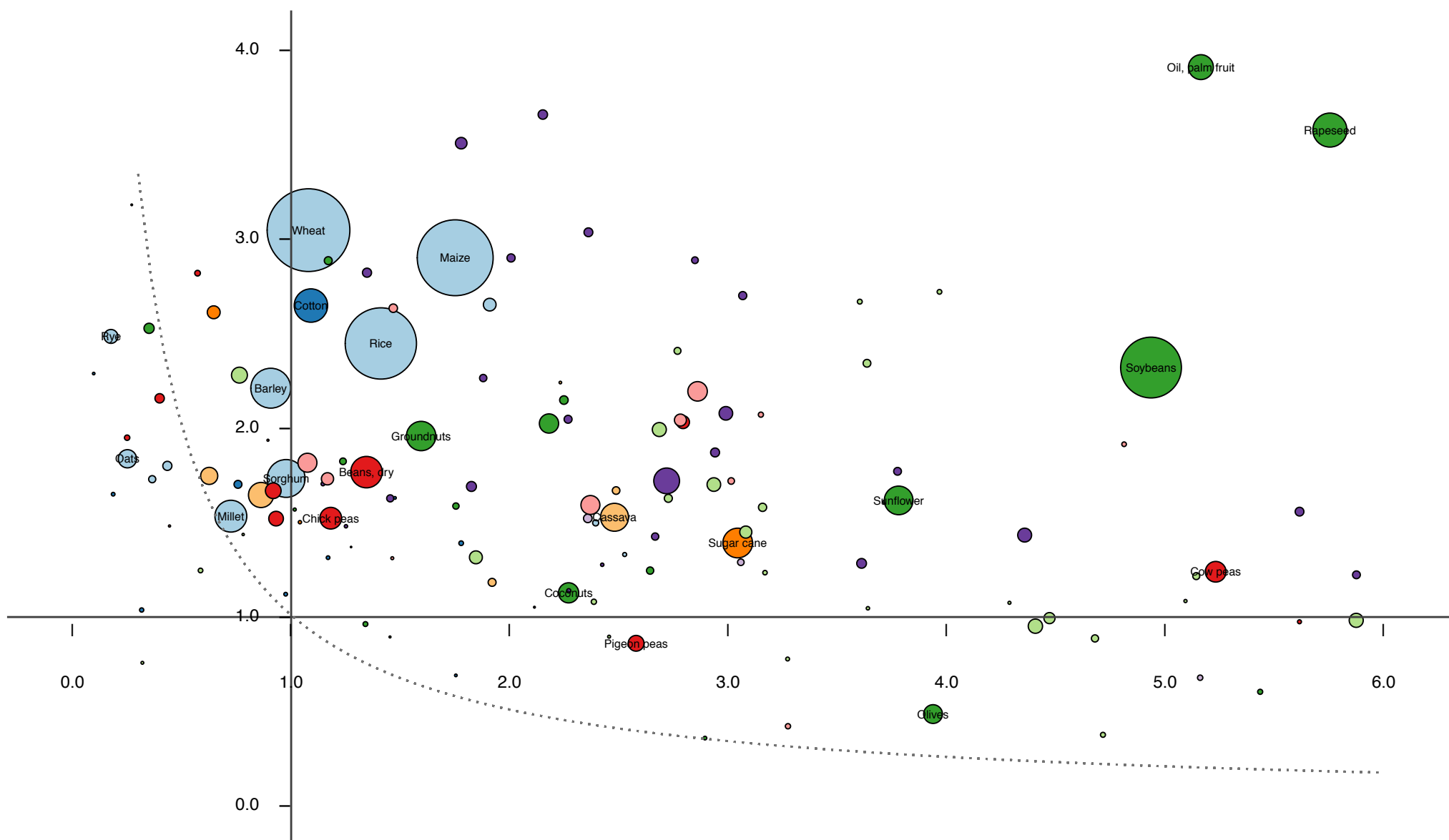


Figure 4. Regional trends in irrigated area and fertilizer consumption from 1961 to 2014. Data were downloaded from FAOSTAT (4). FAOSTAT reports fertilizer data for 1961–2002 separately from the more recent (2002–2014) data. Data was harmonized by calibrating the historical data to match more recent data based on the ratio between the two in 2002. This correction was made by region and nutrient.

Yield ratio (2014/1961)



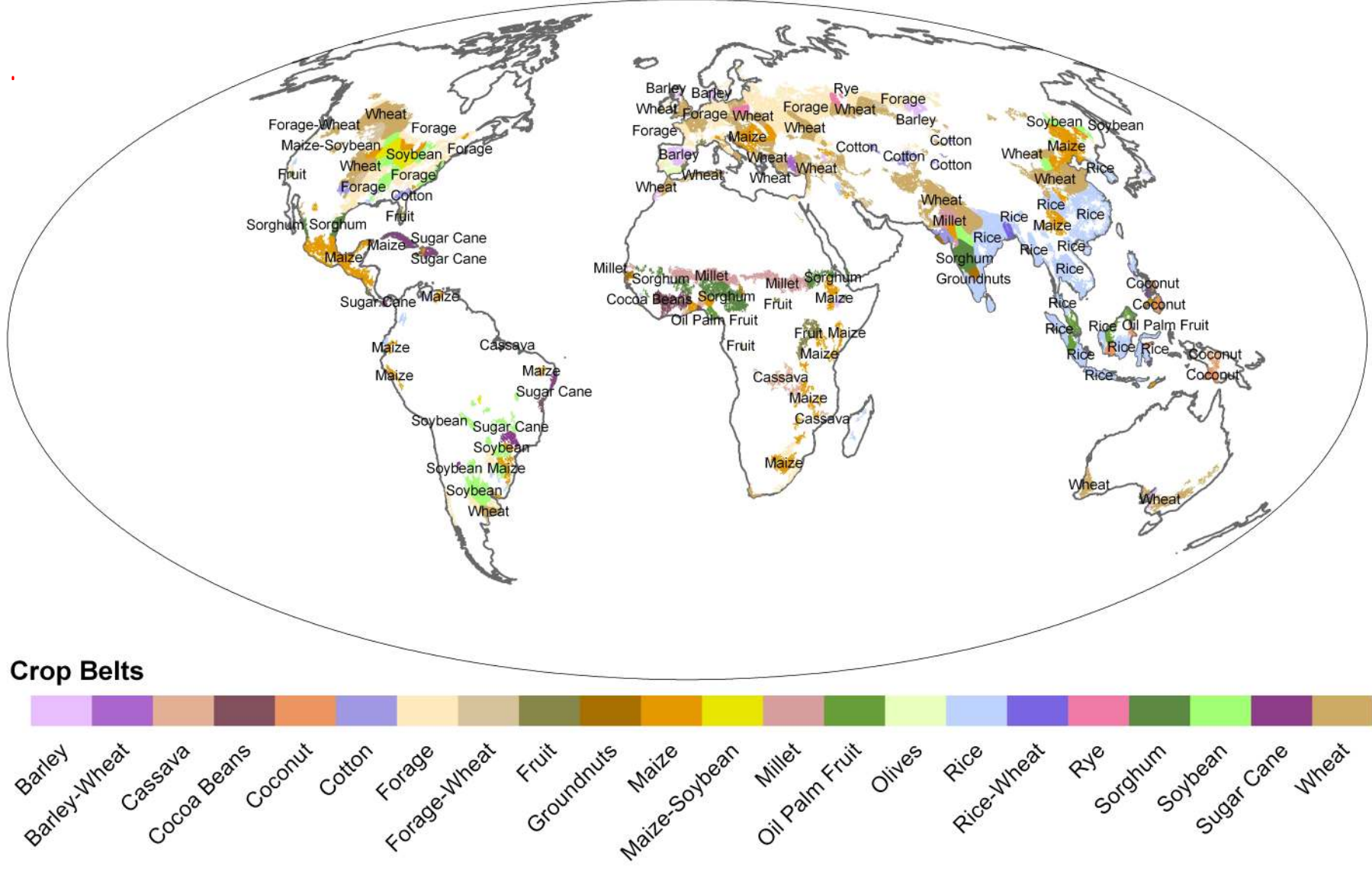
Harvested area ratio (2014/1961)

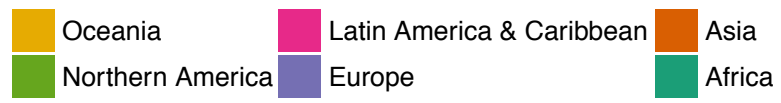


Figure 5. Trends in global harvested area and yields from 1961 to 2014. Figure adapted from (160). Vertical axis shows the 2014/1961 yield ratio, while the horizontal axis shows the 2014/1961 harvested area ratio. In cases where crops were absent in 1961, the ratios were calculated using the earliest year with non-zero values. Size of the circle represents crop harvested area in 2014, while color represents major crop groups. Crops above the dotted curve experienced increases in total production from 1961 to 2014, while production declined for crops below the curve.

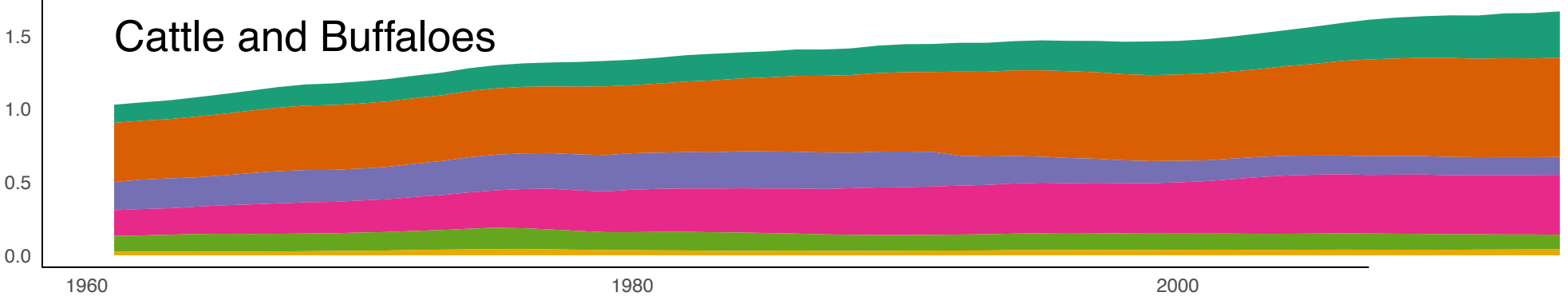


Figure 6. Crop belts of the world (circa year 2000). We show the dominant crop or the two co-dominant crops, derived from a geospatial database of 175 individual crops (<http://www.earthstat.org>).

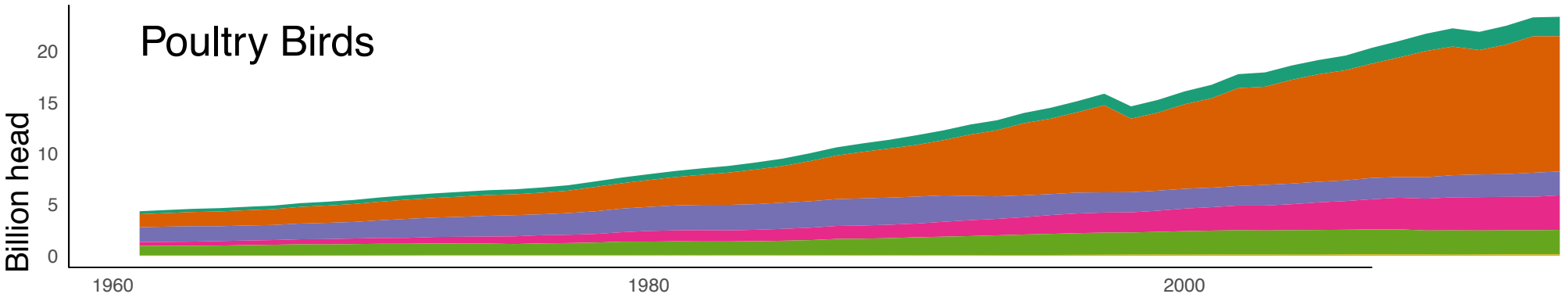




### Cattle and Buffaloes



### Poultry Birds



### Sheep and Goats

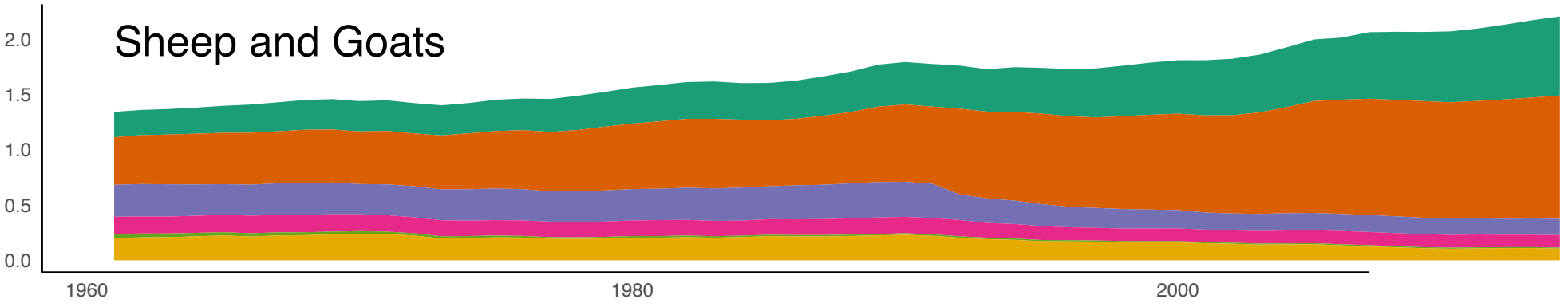


Figure 7. Regional changes in livestock numbers from 1961 to 2014. Data were downloaded from (34).