**Another Voice Podcast with Eric Nelson**

**to accompany Strayer/Nelson, *Ways of the World*, Third Edition**

**The Anthropocene: When did it begin? (Chapter 23)**

**SLIDE 23.1**

What are the origins of the Anthropocene or ‘Age of Man’—that is the lasting impact of human activity on the planet?

There is little question that three important developments in the twentieth century—the explosion in human numbers, our extraordinary tapping of fossil fuels and phenomenal economic growth—have decisively magnified the human impact on the earth’s ecological systems. But, with the benefit of hindsight, one could argue that humankind had been building towards the new era for millennia, and even that our growing impact on the planet reflects the very nature of our species.

**SLIDE 23.2 [Map: The Global Dispersion of Humankind]**

Our earliest ancestors spread across the globe, eventually establishing human populations in nearly every habitable place on the planet. These bands of gatherer hunters are usually described as less disruptive to the environment than later humans because they lived within the productivity of natural ecosystems. But this image can be misleading. A pristine environment’s first encounter with humans was often far from benign, with human arrival frequently correlating with extinction events. Indeed human impact on local ecosystems during this early period has led some scholars to ask whether ours is “an exterminator species” which from the start has thrived on environmental disruption.

**SLIDE 23.3 [Image: Agricultural Scenes from the Tomb of Menna]**

With the shift to agriculture, over millennia humans reshaped large parts of the earth’s surface into less-diverse ecosystems that were focused on producing food, fibers and fuel to sustain growing populations. Time and again, humans have pushed ecosystems too far leading to problems of deforestation, soil exhaustion and water pollution, which in turn put significant strains on societies and civilizations. Today agriculture remains an important and growing strain on ecosystems across the planet.

**SLIDE 23.4 [Image: Industrial Britain]**

While the Agricultural Revolution profoundly affected the physical environment over millennia, the Industrial Revolution transformed humankind’s relationship to its global environment on a time scale of just decades. The burning of fossil fuels, the demands of industry for raw materials, and the prodigious consumption of growing middle classes put unprecedented strains on the environment.

Very rapidly the Industrial Revolution left a mark almost as great on the remote peaks of the Andes, where mining operations thrived, and the plains of Kansas and the outback of Australia, where meat to feed factory workers was produced, as it did on the industrial centers of Manchester, England and Tokyo, Japan. At first, the impact of human activities manifested themselves most clearly on a local or regional level, but as industrialization took root and spread its impact also grew, leading some to date the Anthropocene to the beginning of the industrial age. Now, we are dramatically altering the atmosphere itself, with potentially devastating consequences.

**SLIDE 23.5 [Image: Globalization: One World or Many?]**

Over the last century the human footprint on the planet has only accelerated. The quadrupling of the human population over that short period was certainly a critical factor, but the rising average consumption of each person was also important. The reality is that over the last century humankind has entered uncharted waters and our impact on the planet and its ecosystems is only set to increase raising questions about the viability of our way of life and even the survival of our species in the coming decades and centuries. Given our history, the question remains open as to whether humans are able to alter their ways to address the new realities of the Anthropocene Era.