

Acceptance Speech IAIA 2015: Mathis Wackernagel

Global Environment Award

Dear friends and esteemed colleagues,

Thank you for your kindness and generosity. It deeply touches me that you have selected our work for IAIA's Global Environment Award.

Your organization has been in my conversations since the early 1990s. Members of IAIA have been my mentors. And some members have been intellectual lighthouses – like the late Robert Goodland.

The sheer optimism your organization exudes through its name, has tickled me, IAIA here we come! It is a battle cry for a better world. And indeed we badly need far more rigorous impact measures, because the financial rationales are not sufficient in guiding our decision-making. Calling everything that matters externalities does not cut it.

At Global Footprint Network, our mission is nearly the same as yours: **To make ecological limits central to decision making.** We need this for an equitable and sustainable world. Without embracing resource limits, it is unlikely that we will be able to move out of overshoot by design.

We will eventually move out of ecological overshoot, no doubt. Physics dictates this. The question is merely: Are we doing it by disaster or by design? I do not want the former to win this race.

Inspired by the discipline of impact assessment, Bill Rees and I developed the initial Footprint, an accounting system for measuring our ultimate environmental impact. We asked the question: How many planets does it take to support humanity? Answering this question could then also tell us: how many planets does it take if everybody lived like me or you?

The underlying principles are very simple: Life competes for biologically productive surfaces. You eat a potato, and this takes space. Add space for your tomatoes, the cotton, the milk, the rice, the wood fibers, the timber, the sequestration of your carbon emissions. The sum we call "your Ecological Footprint." And a big part of humanity's Footprint, currently, is the carbon Footprint. In fact there would currently still be sufficient space to absorb all our carbon emissions from fossil fuel, but then there would be far less space for food. We seem to choose food over carbon sequestration.

Once we add up all the surfaces we demand, then we can compare this Footprint with the biologically productive surfaces that exist on the planet – we call this the biocapacity.

I brought some wallet cards along with lots of Footprint data points. They are shaped like credit cards. Like credit cards, they are worth money. Because they help intrigue your friends, and then they will invite you to a free lunch. The cards contain a nauseating amount of data. And what is even cooler – once opened, you cannot fold them back.

Why would you need to know how much nature you have compared to how much you use? I asked this very question to a class of 11-year-olds. A girl immediately raised her hand and said, “If we use more than what we have, the only thing left to eat is imaginary cookies...”

Now. She was not totally right, because we can overuse nature for some time, depleting the stock. For example, cut trees more rapidly than they regrow, deplete soils, overuse groundwater, accumulate CO₂ in the atmosphere. But still, she got the idea far more clearly than most of the ministers I talk to.

How can we make this as clear as crystal for everybody?

This is why our goal with the Footprint is to make planetary limits relevant to decision-making. For cities, countries, investors – for all of us, because we all invest. We all make choices about longer term trajectories. Whether we choose well has huge social and environmental impacts.

We build the Footprint work on one simple premise: If we can measure, we will manage. I am sure you have heard this before. Measure and then manage.

Now, having gotten your fabulous award, I am free to be fully honest. Now I can tell you that this assumption, our foundational premise, on which we built our entire work, is unfortunately flawed. Measurement alone does not lead to management.

Let me explain.

Most, no all, countries continue to focus on income as their golden road to a better future. Few appreciate that income generated through liquidation, is not true income. Income through liquidation makes us poorer. (For example, we falsely call countries that extract oil from the ground “oil producing.” GDP continues to count oil revenues as true income.)

It is like transferring money from your savings account to your checking account and celebrating the transfer as income. The way we blindly focus on income has turned our economies into something that by any definition could be called a Ponzi scheme.

The faulty general belief that maximizing income should be the key criteria for decision-making and is the road to social equity has maintained itself incredibly well over the last decades. It unfortunately even gained momentum with the financial crisis.

At Global Footprint Network, we have tried many great strategies to produce even some tiniest cracks in this faulty edifice of GDP worship – and shift the focus on wealth.

This is how we started:

1) We have produced conservative Footprint accounts, using official data to document that human demand exceeds by far – at least by 50% - what Earth can renew. People say it is interesting – and I see a reference to our numbers in nearly every airline magazine. Has it made a crack in the edifice of GDP adoration? No.

2) We progressed and invited countries to verify the numbers themselves, with their researchers. They should test whether our numbers were out to lunch or sufficiently correct. They should use their own data, not just UN data sets as we do. Over 12 countries have done this. Has it produced a crack in the GDP worshipping? No.

3) On we go. So in one country, Switzerland, where I am from, our Footprint and biocapacity numbers have even made into the official statistics. Has it produced a crack in GDP glorification? No.

4) Then, in Switzerland, it became an official indicator – among the 150. Even the media has reported more about the Footprint than 148 of them (minus GDP of course). The Footprint is quite easy to understand and makes a good story. Has it produced a crack? No.

5) So then, one of the ministers of Switzerland (there are seven of them running the country by consensus), uses the information regularly in her speeches. For instance, she recognizes that from January to August humanity has used as much from nature as it takes our planet one entire year to regenerate. No crack in GDP worshipping either. She even recognizes that Switzerland uses four-fold what Swiss ecosystems can renew. No crack again.

6) Next level up. We were invited, together with an economic think tank, to produce a report on the potential implications of this ecological deficit for Switzerland's long-term competitiveness. With them, we concluded that this deficit leads to an ever more significant systemic risk if not addressed. Again, no cracks.

How can the 11 year old understand the challenge so intuitively? Yet, very very few adults and professionals can wrap their head around it?

What is missing? What does it take?

If we want to increase our chances to end overshoot by design, rather than by disaster, we must produce cracks in this misconception. It is dangerous to maintain that "resources do not matter, because high incomes will save us."

Trying to overcome ever larger ecological deficits with higher income and more liquidation is on average not a winnable strategy in a world of ecological overshoot.

I want to help reshape our common belief – I want to produce some cracks. This is why I am here. I am here to learn from you, to build partnerships, to gain ideas, to learn: what does it take to start producing a few cracks? We depend on your wisdom. As grateful as I am for your kindness to give us your prestigious award, as eager am I to learn from you what we need to do next.

I am here with my dear colleague Dr. Ale Galli. Please talk to us ... and please give us your emails if you want to be on our newsletter distribution list.

Thank you for your generosity and your interest. I look forward to our first conversations.

- See more at:

http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/blog/iaia_award_acceptance_speech#sthash.XxQo0er3.dpuf