Slideshow:

Are there limits to economic growth? Are we reaching the planet's ability to tolerate us?

Provided as open source material for teachers and parents by political economist John Hardesty, Ph.D.

Film Background Lecture & Discussion

Planet of the Humans

(2020)

For teachers, parents & students

PLANET OF THE HUMANS (2020, dir. by Jeff Gibbs) is based on three propositions of ecological economics:

- (1) Our solitary planet has finite resources and cannot tolerate economic growth forever;
- (2) Our profit-seeking capitalist system requires economic growth at both micro and macro levels;
- (3) We have made no significant environmental progress to date—and surged past planetary boundaries 40 years ago.

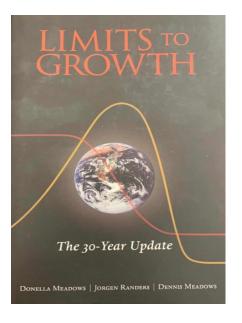
Eco-footprint < or = 1.0

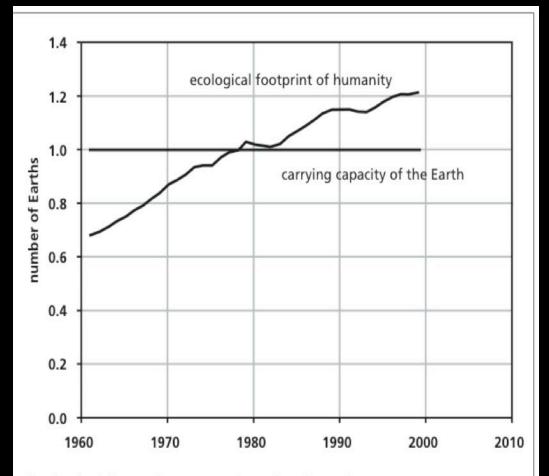


We only have ONE PLANET.

We MUST
learn to live
more simply/humanly
in line with what the
earth provides

1980: the year we began living dangerously





Ecological Footprint versus Carrying Capacity

This graph shows the number of Earths required to provide the resources used by humanity and to absorb their emissions for each year since 1960. This human demand is compared with the available supply: our one planet Earth. Human demand exceeds nature's supply from the 1980s onward, over-shooting it by some 20 percent in 1999. (Source: M. Wackernagel et al.)

The Capitalist System

- Capitalism is an economic system
- Its fundamental institutional basis is private ownership of the means of production and distribution (factories, mines, utilities, retail stores, oil wells, refineries, etc., etc., [referred to as "capital"])
- Thus, the essence of capitalism is that some people are owners (capitalist 1%) who control and the remaining 99% work and take orders to survive.

Capitalism is necessarily unequal and hierarchically structured

Capital owners and their top executives (**the 1%**) have huge incomes and 40% of the wealth.

These incomes come from **profits and corporate stock ownership** (i.e., they do not have to work)

The 99 percent who must work for a living have far less income and wealth.

Those **near the bottom** of the income and wealth hierarchy (due to low wages, disability, racism...) then become officially recognized as **"the poor,"** (e.g., < or = \$26,200 family of 4)

Systems have rules and institutional structures

Great majority of U.S. capital (means of production and distribution) is owned by **publicly-traded**, **privately owned corporations**

Publicly-traded corporations are **owned by shareholders** (stockholders) who buy shares on the stock market (e.g., NYSE)

Corporate CEOs, CFOs, and board members have a legal duty to maximize shareholder wealth (stock prices and annual corporate dividends)

On the micro-level, a corporation must:

- Maximize shareholder wealth which is done by:
 - (1) reducing product costs (wages/unit)

and

(2) Seeking the highest market price,

and

(3) Increasing product sales

This is achieved by profitmaximization

 The private firm that fails to maximize profits by reducing costs and selling more goods loses out in market competition to firms that succeed.

 Then a large portion of profits made in one year must be sunk back into expanding the business so that more goods can be sold next year.

On the macro-level, a capitalist economy that fails to grow experiences job loss and unemployment

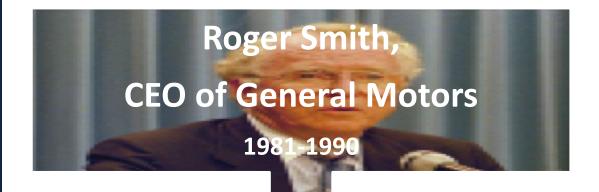
- These are called "recessions" or "depressions."
- In 2020 the covid-19 pandemic is causing a recession worldwide expected to be worse than the 2008-2009 "Great Recession."
- But while this is very bad for people, it is very good for the planet: pollution and carbon emissions are down.

Hypothetical

from the documentary

Roger and Me (dir. by Michael Moore, 1989)





Understands the company can make greater profits by moving Flint, MI assembly plants to Mexico where wages and environmental regulations are lower

BUT refuses to move because of the harm it would do to the tens of thousands of Flint employees and to city of Flint, MI

What happens then?

1. Legally: Smith is personally liable to a shareholders' lawsuit for failing to maximize shareholder wealth

2. Economically: GM will lose ground (market share) to other car corporations that do move their plants to low wage countries and can sell cars at lower prices than GM

Meaning:

Capitalism is NOT a group of individual men & women who do good or bad things but a system of institutions with rules, regulations, and requirements

Since the Great Depression

- For the past 88 years, the federal government has realized its responsibility to keep the economy growing at any cost.
- Without government intervention economic crises would be frequent and devastating.
- Thus, both economic and political requirements dictate unquestioned and perpetual economic growth under capitalism.

The Coronavirus Lessons

- The vast human global economy has been laid low by a tiny simple "creature."
- There are no technical fixes, because there are millions of viral strains, many of which are likely to be deadly to humans.
- As the global economy dialed back, nature responded.

This pandemic and most other new, dangerous viruses

- Are caused by human economic expansion that brings close contact with (1) wild animals or (2) factory chicken, duck, pig or cattle farms
- And are spread rapidly throughout the human world by global economic activity (air travel, global shipping...)



Human economic expansion also causes:



Climate change/crisis (by emitting CO2, methane, etc.)

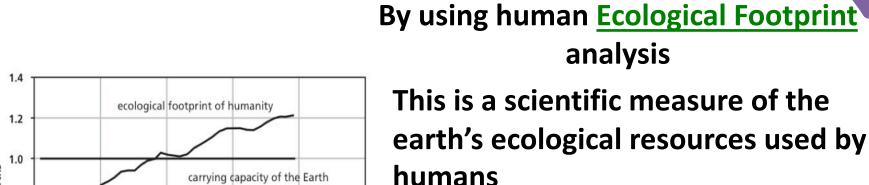


Declining ocean viability



Mass extinction of non-human species

A key way to sum up this point is

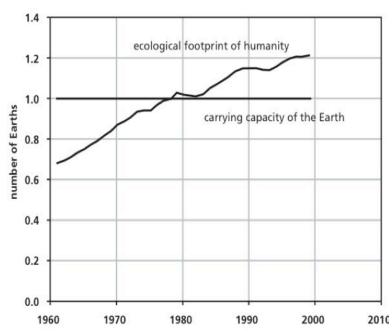




2019: 1.75 planets

That means we are far past what this earth can provide, and

we would have to have another earth-like planet in order to live sustainably,



Ecological Footprint versus Carrying Capacity

And, even with a second planet, we would still have to STOP growing economically!

The Awful Truth

- Begin with a global ecological footprint = 1.75
- To reduce that to 1.0
 Means (approx.) -43% global GDP*
- > i.e., **negative** growth!!! (aka "degrowth")
- During the 2020 pandemic we DO have negative economic growth.
- But under capitalism humans suffer
- And the poor and oppressed suffer most
- Both within and between nations

^{*}Note: an approximate, suggestive number

How many Earths do we need

if the world's population lived like...

U.S.A.	5.0
Mustralia	4.1 🌑 🕙 💮 (
Russia	3.2 🌎 🌎 🌎 (
Germany	3.0 🌎 🌎
Switzerland	2.8
Japan	2.8 🌎 🌎 🌏
U.K.	2.7
■ France	2.7
■ Italy	2.7
Portugal	2.5
Spain	2.5
China	2.2
Brazil	1.7 🌒 🦪
■ India	0.7
World	1.75

Source: Global Footprint Network National Footprint Accounts 2019





The global impact of nations (eco-footprint) varies dramatically

A Stable and Sustainable World Requires Massive **Sharing of** Resources

- Assume GWP (Gross World Product) = \$100 trillion
- To live at 1.0 planets → GWP = \$57 trillion
- But what about poor countries in Africa, Asia, Latin America?
- For example, Burundi has per capita GDP = \$744 (compare USA = \$60,000+)
- Can we ask poor countries to cut their per capita GDP by 43%? Or, at all?

What is REQUIRED?

- Can RICH COUNTRIES move from exploitation to sharing?
- Must THOSE wealthy nations reduce beyond 43%?

This is a process called

degrowth

that...



- Aims to re-politicize environmentalism by "ecologizing society" and discarding "green growth" notions
- Rejects all energy systems based on increasingly sophisticated technological organizations managed by bureaucrats and technocrats
- Not just because they pollute
- But they become decreasingly democratic and egalitarian over time
- And this includes not only fossil fuels but nuclear, big hydro, big wind, concentrated solar, etc.

Degrowth...

Evaluates the economy in terms of how it uses its economic surplus

- Ancient Egypt built the pyramids.
- Feudal Europe built the cathedrals (and crusades).
- Modern capitalism builds more unnecessary economic growth (and militaries).



Degrowth...

Advocates not only "using" the economic surplus to downsize

but, importantly, to reorganize society to emphasize:

- Caring
- Sharing
- More labor-intensity of work
- Cooperation (worker control, consumer control)

These features could mean—
under the slogan
"Redistribution not Growth"—
such changes as,
for example:

Local food growing

Urban gardens

Housing cooperatives housing for all

Communal kitchens—food for all

Communal clinics--health care for all

Decentralized renewable energy

Shorter workweeks

Job guarantees Guaranteed basic income for all



These new ways of life could be implemented as

a process of adaptation to the stagnation of the economy as it fights against planetary boundaries.

If, that is, people fight back and refuse to return to the deadly "normal" that got us here.





"Degrowth" necessarily means

- Transitioning away from a capitalist economic system that requires growth
- And, transitioning toward a localized, democratic socialism
- By, for, and of the people

How would democratic socialism differ?

- NO corporate class inequality and power
- NO wealthy shareholders to be fed and obeyed
- NO capitalist ruling class/deep state/power elite
- NO corporate profit maximization requirement
- Which means we could stop endless GDP growth
- And provide meaningful sustainable work, incomes, homes, health care for all

In terms of avoiding climate catastrophe, one study calculates:

 Every person in the world must limit their CO2 emissions to 2.7 tons per year from now to 2050 in order to keep the global temperature rise under 2 deg. C.

Dale Jamieson, Reason in a Dark Time (2014)

[Prof. Environmental Studies & Philosophy, NYU]

An individual exhausts 2.7 tons of CO2:

- (a) by <u>one</u> round-trip flight SF to NYC,
- (b) by maintaining a typical single-family American home for **one month**OR
- (c) by six months (average) driving in USA

Jamieson concludes: by this standard virtually all Americans are human rights violators.

(As are most of people in the rest of the world who live similar lifestyles.)

Do you feel like a human rights violator?

ASK:

- Working people did not create the mass consumer lifestyle/system
- Who destroyed the U.S. streetcar system and got us hooked on the internal combustion engine?
- Who created the suburbanization of America?
- Who advertised this lifestyle globally?
- Who destroyed all the movements for alternative ways of living like democratic socialism?

We had some sustainable ways of living that capitalism destroyed









STREETCARS



CABLE CARS



Critique of the claim "we are all human rights violators"

What is *missing* in this discussion?

- The consideration of who has the power in our country and who does not
- The controlling role of the capitalist system
- The systems of politics and economics that developed historically and took us to this place

Discussion (or essay prompts)

- IF the only way "civilization" or, worse, even our species, makes it much past year 2100 is if we learn to share planetary resources more or less equally...
- What would you immediately focus on as a citizen to start this process of change?
 Explain.
- Explain what you think must come first, political or economic change.

What would you tell the U.S. president elect to do in his first 100 days in office in 2021?

If economic surplus is the "extra" production above what it takes to provide for the basic needs of all the people, name three categories of our surplus you would reduce/eliminate first (e.g., advertising?).

— Why start with these categories?

Is it the responsibility of the individual to change their habits and way of life, or is it the responsibility of society? Explain.

For societal-level change to occur, what works best?

Top-down forces (like through electoral politics and getting the right person in office)?

Bottom-up forces like grassroots organizing (protests, direct actions, etc.)?

Some combination?

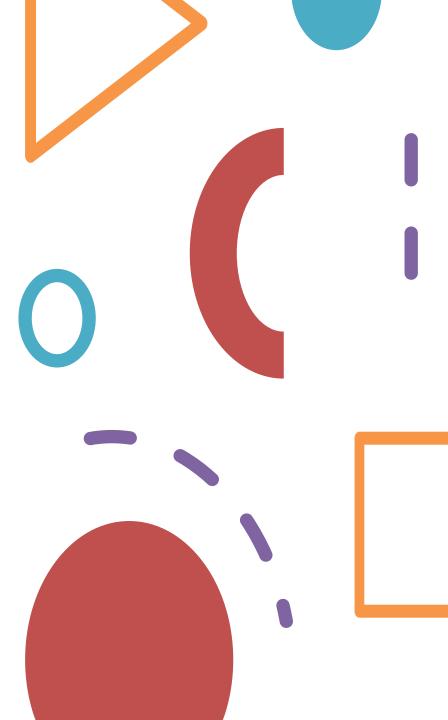
In terms of sharing resources with the world's less privileged, how and where do we (in particular, wealthier countries like the United States) start?

Is there anything we should stop doing internationally? Anything we should start do internationally?

 How can we make life within wealthier countries like the United States more equitable?

What programs do we need?

What should we stop doing?



 Brainstorm a list (then discuss) 5-10 things most people accept unquestioningly that would have to change drastically to live with an ecological footprint of < 1.0 planet.

- What will our nation be like--
- What will our world be like---

If we are able to achieve an ecological footprint < or = 1.0?



Because, there is ONLY ONE EARTH

Concluding comment

So, as Michelle Alexander and others have said,

It is "All of Us or None."

If economic growth is killing our planet, then don't we need to

(1) JUST STOP IT

and

(2) <u>share</u> the earth's resources equitably?

References

"Planet of the Humans (2020) Film Discussion <u>Guide</u>" open-source material (free to download) for teachers and students, provided by Rumble Media. Watch film HERE.

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