

Laudatio for the
Sustainability Award supported by Nobel Sustainability Trust Foundation for
Leadership in Implementation

By Prof. Dr. Volker Sieber

Dear members of the Nobel family, distinguished guests,

It is a tremendous privilege to stand before you today to celebrate the extraordinary achievements of Dr. Mathis Wackernagel, a visionary scholar and dedicated advocate for our planet. Today, we recognize a man whose contributions to sustainability and resource management have changed the way we understand and handle our relationship with Earth. His life's work, much like his character, is marked by an unwavering commitment to truth, understanding, and not less than to humanity's common future.

Born and raised in Switzerland, Mathis had early initiation and inspirations on and for his path to take. He was made aware of the limits of space to feed the people within the confined space of a country, Switzerland. While experiencing the first oil crisis in his childhood he realized the need and potential of renewable fuel, raising in him the hope for the fast implementation of these and finally, he grew up surrounded by nature's beauty, instilling in him a profound respect for our environment.

His academic journey began with obtaining a solid foundation in mechanical engineering at the ETH Zurich, where he learned the precision of engineering, the power of systems and the mathematical tools to work with them. These foundational studies set the stage for his pioneering insights and for the creation of a model that would ultimately reshape global discussions about sustainability.

But Mathis's journey to global impact began in earnest during his doctoral studies at the University of British Columbia. It was here, under the mentorship of Professor William Rees, that Mathis would co-develop a concept that transformed a theoretical discourse into a tangible framework: The Ecological Footprint.

This concept translates complex environmental impacts into a straightforward measure that anyone can understand: the amount of biologically productive land and sea area required to sustain the consumption habits and waste absorption needs of an individual person, a community, a country's population or beyond. The Ecological Footprint is clear and

relatable, simple yet profound—it illuminates our planet's limits and shows how badly we're pushing past them.

When Mathis and William Rees published their pioneering work, they did more than just add a new tool to the academic toolkit; they provided a way for all of us to see the world differently. For the first time, we had a measurement of humanity's demand on nature, set against Earth's capacity to regenerate. The numbers, stark as they were, spoke volumes: our planet's resources were finite, and we were consuming them at an alarming rate. Through the concept of overshoot, Mathis demonstrated that humanity was already exceeding Earth's sustainable boundaries—running, in essence, an ecological deficit. And in a world that constantly talks about climate change, we quickly lose the insight of the real problem. Mathis' insight that overshoot is the overarching dynamic, and climate change just one of its symptoms points us to the right direction to go to the roots of today's challenges and not just tamper with the symptoms.

The concept of the Ecological Footprint was well received across disciplines and boundaries. Today, it is one of the most widely used sustainability metrics in the world. Governments, businesses, NGOs, and individuals have embraced it as a fundamental tool for understanding and managing our environmental impact. The Ecological Footprint has become a lens through which policymakers and citizens can assess sustainability, guiding policies and enabling accountability.

In 2003, Mathis took his commitment further by founding, together with Susan Burns, the Global Footprint Network, a research organization dedicated to advancing sustainability metrics worldwide. Under his leadership, this organization has become a trusted authority, partnering with countries, cities, and institutions worldwide, helping them to evaluate and monitor their ecological footprints and providing the basis for policy-making. Through this work, he has given leaders the tools they need to create smarter, more sustainable strategies for economic growth. And that is implementation at its best.

But what makes Mathis truly standing out is not just his intellectual brilliance but his deep empathy for humanity and his strong believe that humanity can achieve the turning of the tide, in spite of political backlashes as we currently see not far from here. He recognizes that sustainability is not a goal we can achieve in isolation; it requires collaboration, humility, and a commitment to justice and fairness. In his work, Mathis emphasizes that sustainability is not simply about reducing consumption; it's about creating a world where resources are used equitably, so generations to come can enjoy a thriving planet. When he is comparing

our overutilization of the planet's resources to a Pyramid, a Ponzi scheme, he points right at the heart that it is our responsibility to end it, to be at the bottom layer, and not the one of any coming generation, of whose resources we live ...

So, Mathis' mission is not merely academic or professional; it's deeply ethical. He challenges us all to make ourselves aware and ask ourselves difficult questions about our impact on the world and to take responsibility for our collective future.

And here Mathis is continuing to inspire us. He reminds us that our actions matter, that every choice we make has a ripple effect on our planet. His life's work calls us to examine our behaviors, our policies, and our values. He has shown us that sustainability is not a burden but a path to a more equitable and resilient world.

In a time when the environmental challenges we face can feel overwhelming, Mathis offers us hope and gives us motivation. His strong optimism and belief in our collective ability to achieve a positive change should be motivating us and help so it will become like a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Today, we honor Mathis Wackernagel—not only for his groundbreaking ideas and tireless advocacy but also for his spirit, which has inspired countless others to join the journey toward sustainability. He is a true pioneer, a guardian of our fragile planet, and a beacon of hope for all of us.

So, Mathis, on behalf of everyone here today I would like to thank you. Thank you for your vision, for your courage, and for your tireless dedication. You remind us that our choices matter, that each decision we make leaves a footprint, and that together, we have the power to chart a sustainable path forward. This is true leadership.

Congratulation on the award for leadership and implementation of the Nobel Sustainability Trust.