

Mathis Wackernagel Notes for Nobel Sustainability Award Speech

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THANK YOU

It is truly a thrill to be recognized by the Nobel family. I feel touched and humbled—and it is sweet to share this moment with all of you.

I am deeply grateful to the Nobel family, not only for this accolade but for making sustainability a central theme of their Trust's work. Progress on sustainability has been stunningly slow, and it has become an all-hands-on-deck situation. My heartfelt congratulations also go to the other awardees.

A big thank you to the selection committee from the Technical University of Munich, and to everyone who supported them. Thank you, Prof. Volker Sieber, for your kind *laudatio*.

Finally, I want to express immense gratitude to everyone [who made the Footprint work possible](#). This includes Susan Burns, with whom I co-founded Global Footprint Network; Bill Rees, with whom I created the Footprint framework; and the many friends, colleagues, teachers, mentors, funders, and partners who generously shared their time, resources, and expertise. Together, we have pursued a shared passion for a world where all can thrive within the planet's means.

LEARNING FROM THE PAST

Being celebrated in this way is a wonderful gift. It's also liberating. It means there is something that people have appreciated about my work. This allows me to reflect, without hesitation and full honesty, on where I have failed and what I can learn from those failures. After all, mistakes are often far more interesting to discuss than accomplishments.

But before diving into failures, I want to thank the Nobel Trust and its selection committee for recognizing our achievements. They acknowledged that the concept of a "[footprint](#)" has become a new way of framing human impact. It provides a specific measure—[overshoot](#)—that captures how much we take compared to what the planet can regenerate, which is humanity's core challenge.

They appreciated how footprint statistics have spread and become reference points for sustainability discussions—for instance, the concept of "how many planets" we use. [Earth Overshoot Day](#) has gained global recognition; in Germany, 43% of the population knows about it, and it garners 7 billion media impressions annually. Even governments have engaged with the idea. As a Swiss national, I was particularly struck when Switzerland [held a vote](#) on whether the country should live within the means of one Earth by 2050 (though, sadly, the majority voted "no").

While these accomplishments seem impressive, they pale against the larger reality: despite spreading ideas, the physical trajectory of the world has not shifted significantly. Global resource demand has only grown, and today, the world is just as reliant on fossil fuels—percentage-wise—as it was in 1972, though now at much higher absolute levels.

Even within our own organization, much of our work has produced more dialogue than action. In hindsight, I see ways I—and the organizations I've worked with—could have done things better.

RECOGNIZING INCENTIVES

As Upton Sinclair pointed out over 100 years ago that *it is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on not understanding it*.

This observation highlights a key challenge: if the information we present does not bring clear advantages to our audience or improve their lives, if we label it as “inconvenient truth”, they are unlikely to embrace it. In fact, the more factual and relevant the information, the more it may feel like a threat, provoking even more resistance rather than acceptance.

This was my mistake. I believed the information I offered was a gift, helping people understand their new context so they could make better decisions. But most people did not see it that way. What I learned is this: it doesn't matter if I think my information is helpful—it matters whether *they* perceive it as beneficial. The real question is whether they truly desire it.

This realization now drives our efforts at Global Footprint Network. We focus on finding ways to reframe overshoot and planetary limits so that people find it empowering and actionable. This isn't about greenwashing or sugarcoating—it's about finding opportunities to genuinely making the information useful to those we want to engage. For that we engage both at the micro level (companies and cities) as well as at the macro level (countries)

MICRO-LEVEL ENGAGEMENT: COMPANIES AND CITIES

At the micro level, we work with companies and cities. Some find the following storyline compelling:

1. **The future is highly predictable.** In any imaginable scenario, there will be more climate change and resource constraints. These are inevitable consequences of global [overshoot](#). While such overuse can continue for a while, it will end—either by design or by disaster.
2. **Overshoot's impacts are cumulative.** The future is coming faster than expected, even if we slow our overall demand. This also means that this future is approaching us faster than our cities, buildings, and infrastructure may be able to adapt.
3. **Resource constraints will shape economic success.** Climate change and resource scarcity will increasingly determine which businesses (and assets) thrive and which fail.

The critical question then becomes: what will hold value in this predictable future? Within this context, we suggest that particularly those businesses that reduce pressure on Earth's ecosystems will gain value because they will remain viable and essential, and they will not run into biophysical constraints. To measure this, we ask: *How much does a company reduce or increase global overshoot per million dollars of value added?*

MACRO-LEVEL ENGAGEMENT: COUNTRIES

At the macro level, we focus on countries, [recognizing that resource security will become a key determinant of economic opportunity](#). Nations with [biocapacity](#) reserves—those that consume less than their ecosystems can renew—will have a distinct advantage.

However, the global economy currently fails to account for overshoot. Humanity uses 1.7 Earths, but achieving ecological stability may well require not to use more than half of Earth's capacity. The massive gap between sustainable use and actual demand reflects a significant market failure.

How can this be addressed? One idea is to make it clearer which countries have [biocapacity reserves and which are in deficit](#). This could strengthen the bargaining position of nations with biocapacity reserves. Such countries could even consider forming market alliances. There is a precedent with oil, where oil exporting countries have coordinated their policies for oil exports—the resource of the past—. A similar policy response could be imagined for biocapacity, the resource of the future.

SHIFTING THE NARRATIVE

Lastly, we need to tell the environmental story differently. A doctor once told me: *"People worry more about empty fridges than overflowing garbage cans."*

This insight is crucial. Garbage can be ignored or passed on to others, but an empty fridge hits close to home. By expanding the view beyond carbon emissions and focusing on overshoot, we turn the challenge into a tangible, actionable issue. It's no longer just about being noble or altruistic—it's about survival and thriving in a predictable future.

People want to be on the winning team. Sustainability can be winnable—not because of moral imperatives, but because the alternative is bleak, particularly for those who remain unprepared.

Many thank again to the Nobel Sustainability Trust and to everyone supporting these efforts. Let's focus on strategies that are not only effective but also invite people to act. Let's forge strategies where acting is so much more attractive than waiting.