

Written by William E. Rees, PhD, FRSC
Sunday, 21 December 2008

Fact: Most public policy directed toward so-called sustainability, including alternative energy, is directly or indirectly oriented toward maintaining the status quo by other means*i.e.*, it emphasizes growth through efficiency or is geared toward increasing supply rather than reducing demand. This (along with kow-towing to the private sector) is what run-of-the-river hydro is all about.

Problem: Governments (and even most "environmental" organizations) have yet to confront a contrary two-fold reality that demands a very different approach:

Scientists, particularly climate-change scientists, have grossly underestimated the scale and rapidity of climate change. Arctic warming/melting is 80-100 years ahead of the IPCC's business-as-usual scenario. The most recent peer-reviewed research suggests that the world will be hard-pressed to avoid stabilizing GHGs at less than 650 ppm CO² which implies a 50% probability of a catastrophic 4C° of warming. Eco-footprint analysis shows that the world is in over-shoot, using 25-40% more of nature's goods and services each year than the planet can sustainably produce. We are depleting essential natural capital.

Solution: There is nothing for it but to GIVE UP GROWTH. The era of material exuberance in the First World is over. Public policy that does not reflect this reality merely accelerates ecosystemic and ultimately societal collapse.

In this light, the mad scramble by governments everywhere to re-establish "normal" growth after the recent implosion of the world's greed-driven financial markets is tragicomedy on a global scale. Sustainability requires that we should, instead, be planning a stable way down for everyone while we still have the capacity to do so. Governments should be negotiating a global treaty on "contraction and convergence" by which the First World would shrink its per eco-footprints to converge, at a sustainable level, with justifiably growing per capita EFs in the Third World. We should aim to de-carbonize the global economy completely by 2025. All this implies an 80% reduction in per capita consumption and waste production by North Americans.

The good news is that the implicit serious conservation effort would generate more energy from existing sources than can be derived by supply-side approaches. Ecologically hazardous run-of-the-river hydro is an unnecessary growthist strategy.

By the way, "zero growth" may be blasphemy today, but within a decade or so it will have become holy doctrine.

The inventor of the "eco-footprint" concept, [Dr. William Rees](#) is one of the world's foremost ecological and sustainability experts. He teaches at the UBC School of Community and Regional Planning.

This article was reprinted from saveourrivers.ca.