

## 05 Is Societal Collapse an Issue?

*For 5,000 years, humans lived in the past tense: "Yesterday was the same as tomorrow." For the next 500 years people lived in the present tense: "Today can be whatever we want it to be." But now, for the next 50 years we must start living in the future tense: "Tomorrow's social, economic and political constraints must become today's reality."*

*"August 13 is Earth Overshoot Day 2015, marking the date when humanity has exhausted nature's budget for the year. For the rest of the year, we will maintain our ecological deficit by drawing down local resource stocks and accumulating carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. We will be operating in overshoot."*

Global Footprint Network

Climate change is the poster child for the issue of societal collapse; it is Mother Nature's response to the economic, political and social means we have created as our current way of life.

It now takes one and one-half planets to provide the resources used and to absorb the waste created each year by people. Since 1970, human demands have exceeded the capacity of the planet to meet their needs. In simple terms, each year we cut down more trees than are replaced by new ones. We are depleting the planet's capacity to support life.

*The Living Planet 2014* is the most recent annual report from environmental scientists on the health of the planet. The report is similar to a person's own annual physical examination. It is a series of specific measures that are collected each year and compared with the same measures taken earlier. Every measure on the health of the planet shows the same trend as counting the trees. There are fewer animals and fish, more droughts, less drinkable water, more floods and severe weather, more greenhouse gases and warmer global temperatures.

When I was born, there were 2.2 billion people in the world. Today there are over 7 billion, all within my lifetime. When the population rapidly expands over three-fold, so too do the demands increase while the supply of resources declines. When demand exceeds the reserve supply, there will not be enough to go around. The result is societal collapse: A surplus of people with too little to eat and no other place to go.

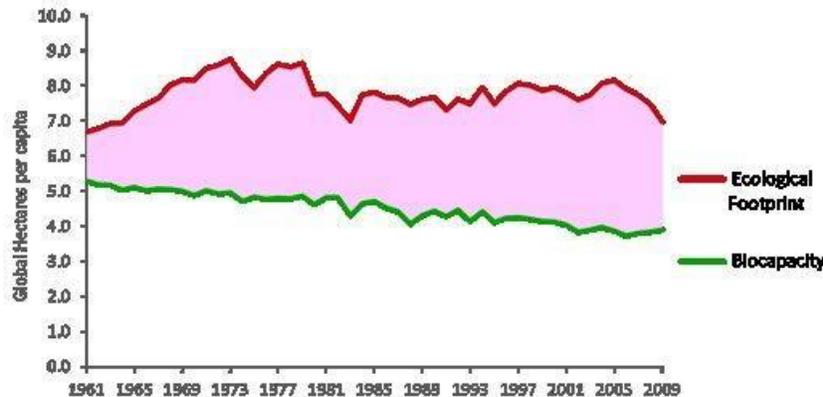
By taking more from our ecosystems and natural processes than can be replenished, we are jeopardizing our future.

WWF *Living Planet Report 2014*  
Page 4

Science and technology have given us methods for collecting and interpreting such facts, and for making logical decisions about them. Ideological answers – ones based simply on beliefs – are not appropriate at this point.

We have been living under the assumption of the capacity for continual growth. The alternative assumption is that the human race is at a tipping point; there is a point in the near future which, if crossed, will result in an inevitable unfolding of events that will destroy the capacity of the planet to support civilized society as we know it.

The human footprint is a measure of the demands on the planet made by people and the bio-capacity are the resources for meeting those needs. The United States is in the unique position as being the worst offender in the world. We are taking our excess from the abundance of other countries. As a result we are in the awkward position of trying to convince other nations to accept responsibility for a problem for which we are the largest contributor. Not surprisingly, the response of other countries has been to expect us to lead the way.



Source: Global Footprint Network

Humankind cannot alter the ways of nature. What is under human control is the decision to make no more waste and use no more resources than nature can absorb or produce each year. As Pogo often noted, “we have met the enemy and them is us,” and as Alice Walker concluded, “we are the ones we have been waiting for.”

If societal collapse is an issue to be addressed, what are the aspects of our way of life that have to change?

Clearly there is no single ideological approach – an economic, political or social one – to make the necessary adjustments. All three must be brought into play simultaneously. But, unlike facts and knowledge, our beliefs and values are negotiable. Reasonable people can recognize that the necessity for change is non-negotiable, thus requiring respect for the perspective of others on the wide range of potential partial solutions, none of which alone will be sufficient.

Choices are based on facts, solutions on compromise.