



Policy Briefing Paper

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Indigenous Wisdom: Living in Harmony with Mother Earth

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This Briefing Paper summarizes a longer study available from KAIROS. See back page for how to order.

In an age when climate change and other ecological crises threaten life on Earth, we humans must learn to live within the carrying capacity of our planet. Scientists warn that continuing to burn fossil fuels at current rates will render most of planet Earth uninhabitable. Looming crises include mass extinctions of plant and animal species, land degradation, ocean acidification and depletion of vital resources, especially groundwater. The ancestral wisdom of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas can guide us towards finding solutions to these unprecedented challenges.

One way to measure how humanity is living beyond the Earth's capacity is the size of our ecological footprint. Ecological footprints measure how much of the Earth's arable land, pastures, forests, oceanic food production and carbon dioxide absorption capacity is used by humans relative to the ecosystem's carrying capacity.

As the chart illustrates, when ecological footprints were first calculated in 1961, humans lived within the regenerative capacity of the natural world. By the 1990s, however, our overall consumption exceeded the Earth's biocapacity by a significant amount. By 2007, humanity's ecological footprint exceeded the planet's carrying capacity by 50%. Thus it would take one-and-a-half Earths to

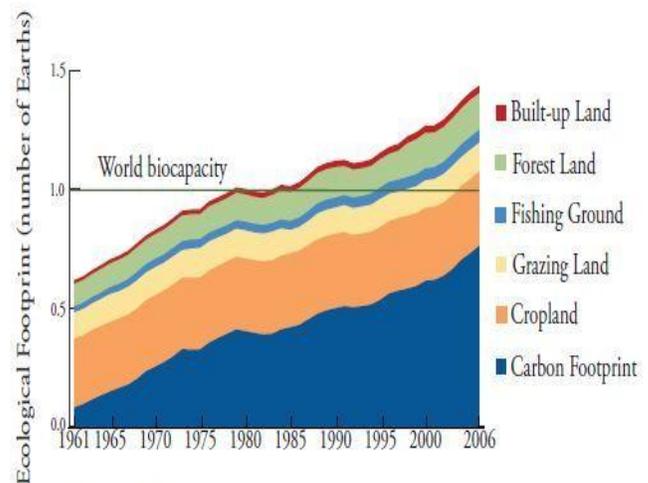


Figure 3. Humanity's Ecological Footprint, 1961-2006

sustain the rate at which we are exploiting nature. As the blue segment on the bottom shows, rising carbon emissions are the biggest contributor to this unsustainable reality.

Indigenous peoples' teachings can guide us in learning how to reduce our ecological footprint. They speak of living in harmony with Mother Earth, taking only what we need, always conscious of the impact of our actions on seven generations to come. This ancestral wisdom provides a vision of genuinely sustainable societies where people care for one another, engage in creative work and deepen their spiritual lives while sharing in the Creator's gifts of clean air, water and nutritious food.

Indigenous Teachings on ‘Living Well’

The languages of Andean Indigenous peoples have expressions that embody this ancient wisdom: *suma qamaña* in Aymara; *sumak kawsay* in Quechua; *teko pora* in Guarani; and *kume mogen* in Mapuche. The Cree term for the same concept is *miyo matsuwini*. These terms can be translated into Spanish as *buen vivir* or *vivir bien* and into English as “living well” or “the good way of living.” A fuller translation might be “living appropriately so that others may also live.”

David Choquehuanca, an Aymara, Foreign Minister of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, explains how “*Vivir bien* means living well based on the knowledge of our peoples, not living better at the cost of others. *Vivir bien* involves achieving equilibrium, enabling harmony among people, but most fundamentally harmony between humanity and nature.”

An Ecuadorean Indigenous leader, Florencia Simbaña writes that “*Sumak kawsay* is fundamentally different from the Western mindset where humans are seen as separate from nature, where nature is seen as something to be controlled, as an object of domination and source of wealth. For Indigenous peoples, humans are not separate from nature but part of it and nature is not a resource but the mother of all that exists. *Sumak kawsay* involves living in harmony with the cycles of Mother Earth.”

Canada’s Extractivist Economy Faces Challenges Similar to Those of Bolivia and Ecuador

From 2007 to 2011, natural gas accounted for 41% of Bolivia’s exports, while unprocessed minerals made up another 32%. During those same years, crude oil comprised 52% of Ecuador’s exports and bananas constituted another 11%. Crude oil and natural gas constituted 19% of Canadian exports in 2013, while mineral ores and mineral products made up another 15%.

During the last century, Canada successfully diversified its economy away from over-dependence on the export of raw materials, a trend that has been reversed in the past 15 years. The proportion of Canadian exports consisting of unprocessed, or lightly processed, resource products rose from 39% in 1999 to 59% in 2013.

Raul Prada Alcoreza, former Deputy Minister of Planning for the Plurinational State of Bolivia, identifies several imperatives for building an economy and

a society consistent with the principles of *vivir bien*, all of which have relevance for Canada:

- rejection of the dictates of international markets that require a country to remain primarily an exporter of raw materials;
- state control, rather than private transnational corporate control, over strategic raw materials, especially the hydrocarbon sector when it is the principal generator of economic surplus;
- state redistribution and reinvestment of economic surplus through taxation, including a carbon tax, to guarantee that wealth remains within the country;
- prioritizing internal markets before turning to exports;
- industrialization of natural resources to overcome dependence on the export of raw materials, while respecting the integrity of life-giving ecosystems;
- provision of clean technologies for small and medium producers; and recognition and promotion of local community economies.

Canada Caught in a Bitumen Trap

All the classic features of a “staples trap,” that is an economy excessively dependent on raw material exports, are visible in Canada’s “bitumen trap”: heavy investment in production and transportation infrastructure, growing reliance on foreign capital, disproportionate political influence of petroleum corporations, and growing regional inequality.

The enormous influence petroleum corporations wield over public policy is manifest in a number of ways – the weakening of environmental regulations, public subsidies, low tax and royalty rates, and the absence of meaningful regulations to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Bolivia Taking a Different Path

President Evo Morales nationalized Bolivia’s petroleum industry in 2006 responding to a popular movement led by Indigenous Bolivians fed up with centuries of exploitation of their natural patrimony, first by the Spanish conquerors and later by foreign corporations. Bolivia turned the allocation of revenues from natural gas on its head by allocating 82% of the revenues to the public purse while leaving 18% in private hands.

In doing so Bolivia followed the example of Norway which captures 85% of revenues from oil and gas for public purposes. Canada should also appropriate a larger share of petroleum wealth by imposing a Norwegian-style excess profits tax. Alberta should boost its share of the petro wealth by increasing royalties and reversing its corporate tax cuts.

The Bitumen Trap is Also a Carbon Trap

Extracting synthetic petroleum from the tar sands generates from 3.2 to 4.5 times as many greenhouse gases (GHGs) as conventional oil extraction. Planned expansion of tar sands production would add more carbon dioxide to the atmosphere by 2020 than all the GHG reductions that are expected from other sectors. The growth of the bitumen industry locks Canada into an increasingly carbon-dependent development path at the very moment in time when other countries are shifting aggressively toward more sustainable, low-carbon strategies.

Ecuadoreans Resisting Petroleum Extraction

From 1964 to 1990 Texaco (now owned by Chevron) exploited petroleum from Ecuador's Amazonian region with devastating consequences for Indigenous peoples: water pollution, deforestation, loss of biodiversity, the death of wild and domestic animals, and human illnesses, including high rates of cancer. This experience led to the demand by civil society to keep 850 million barrels of heavy crude underground in the Yasuní National Park.

Although President Rafael Correa initially supported the proposal, in 2013 he announced that he would allow exploration for oil to proceed in parts of park because not enough money had been pledged by the international community to compensate Ecuador. Civil society groups have demanded a referendum on the Yasuní initiative which so far has been resisted by the electoral tribunal. Nevertheless the struggle continues. In Ecuador and elsewhere in Bolivia, Brazil, El Salvador, Nigeria and India where similar initiatives have been launched to keep petroleum or other minerals underground. Canadians should listen to Nnimmo Bassey's exhortation to "*Leave the oil in the soil, the coal in the hole, and the tar sands in the land.*"

Indigenous Peoples in Canada Also Leading Resistance

Indigenous peoples have rights under the Canadian constitution to be consulted before resource development projects can proceed on or near their territories. Several First Nations are asserting this right by challenging tar sands projects in court.

KAIROS has joined Indigenous organizations in Canada and around the world in demanding full recognition of Indigenous peoples' right to free, prior and informed consent for resource extraction projects as set out in the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Living appropriately so that others may also live

A major obstacle to living appropriately in harmony with Mother Earth is the impact of the consumer society that is so prevalent in the global North.

David Choquehuanca, the Aymara Foreign Minister of Bolivia, poses a direct challenge to those who consume a disproportionate share of the Earth's resources: "The construction of *suma gamaña* ... [requires] ending consumerism, excessive spending and luxury, consuming only what is needed, lowering the global economic bar to levels of production and consumption of energy that the health and resources of the planet allow. The countries of the North above all need to take responsibility for the damage, stop climate change and the excessive exploitation of natural resources."

Movements are emerging in the North to implement what is known in French as *décroissance* and awkwardly translated into English as "*degrowth*." Advocates of *degrowth* point to the depletion of natural resources, particularly conventional oil and gas reserves, climate change, the loss of biodiversity and the overuse of resources by industrial nations at the expense of the global South, as motivations for questioning the sustainability of the classical economic model based on limitless growth. This movement challenges the conventional assumption that a growing economy is necessary to overcome poverty. Peter Victor, a Canadian ecological economist, describes how "Economic growth has not brought full employment, it has not eliminated poverty – in fact by some measures poverty has increased – and it has not solved our environmental problems."

Overcoming the Culture of Dissatisfaction

Mary Jo Leddy analyzes the need to overcome what she calls a culture of dissatisfaction:

“Consumerism works only as long as we are even slightly dissatisfied with what we have ... This dissatisfaction is not natural. It is a culturally induced dissatisfaction that is essential to the dynamic of the culture of money. ... Genuine social and political change can occur only if it is ... accompanied by an attempt to transform the spirit of craving and dissatisfaction.”

Towards Living in Harmony with Mother Earth

Some of the steps Canadians will have to take in order to begin to live in harmony with Mother Earth following Indigenous peoples' wisdom include:

- Keeping the bitumen in the ground
- Investing in energy efficiency, conservation and renewable energy as promoted by the Green Economy Network
<http://www.greeneconomynet.ca/>
- Shortening work time in order to make jobs available for all who wish to work
- Reduce, Reuse, Recycle, Redesign, Re-localize
- Adopting holistic indicators rather than Gross Domestic Product
- Dismantling the culture of consumerism
- Amending or abrogating free trade agreements

The last step is necessary because both the energy sharing clause in the North American Free Trade Agreement and the investor-state mechanism in various trade and investment agreements are grave barriers to measures that would reduce dependence on the extraction of bitumen or other non-conventional hydrocarbons like shale gas. Bolivia and Ecuador have taken the lead by cancelling bilateral investment agreements that contain investor-state dispute mechanisms similar to those in NAFTA.

Social movements in Canada resisting ecologically destructive projects such as bitumen extraction and pipelines can take inspiration from Andean social movements and Indigenous teachings on living well in harmony with Mother Earth.

This Briefing Paper summarizes our 32-page study:

Indigenous Wisdom: Living in Harmony with Mother Earth



This KAIROS publication explores how the ancestral wisdom of the Indigenous peoples of the Americas can guide us as we face unprecedented challenges from climate change and related ecological crises.

It explores Andean peoples' teachings on how to live well in harmony with the natural world and what Canadians can learn from these teachings.

To order the free download or \$10 hard copy of *Indigenous Wisdom: Living in Harmony with Mother Earth* please go to <http://www.kairoscanada.org/shop/>

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