

Podcast #36¹

Living in the Future Tense: Climate Change Summit, Part 2

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Welcome to Forums for a Future.

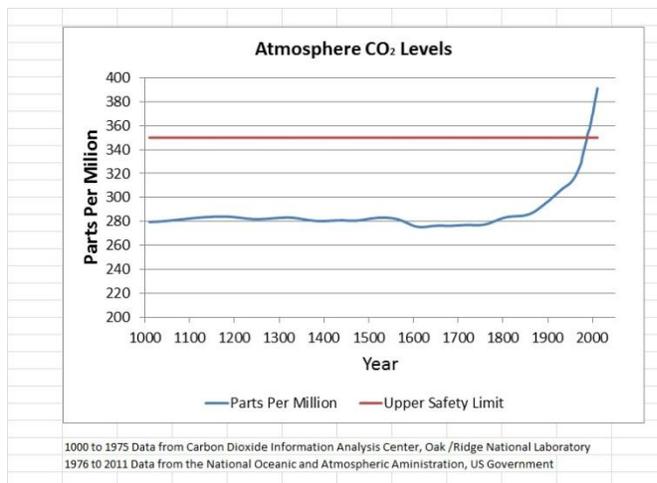
The subject of the current series of podcasts is “Living in the Future Tense.” The series is based on the proposition that the choices we make today will have irreversible consequences within our own lifetime. Thus, for those of us now living, in this the Post-Modern Era, our new reality is that we are living in the future tense: “Today is Tomorrow.”

In the previous era – the Modern Era – people lived in the “Present Tense.” They believed they could have whatever they wanted, now. They lived as if there was no tomorrow.

The defining feature of “living our life in the future tense” is that we are currently *taking to the limit* every aspect of our economic, political and social existence.

The clearest example is the rapid, exponential, growth in world population over the past 100 years which has exceed the capacity of the planet to replace the energy used and to absorb the waste produced. But, there are many other indications that we are living in exponential times for which population growth can serve as a metaphor for the more general concept of “*taking it to the limit, one more time.*”

The political, economic and social reality of “meeting the limits” will be the *defining moments* of the Post-Modern Era. The time span is the 50-year interval encompassing the life span of the majority of people who are alive today. We must now start “Living in the Future Tense:” for today is our tomorrow.



Today’s podcast, #36, is the second part of a three part series on the world summit negotiations to combat climate change. Greenhouse gas emissions are one of the many specific issues *we are taking to the limit, yet one more time.* For the past 1000 years the level of CO₂ in the atmosphere has remained relatively constant at 280 ppm, but starting with the industrial revolution been increasing at an accelerating rate to 390 ppm, well above the upper safety limit of 350 ppm.

In December 2009 the UN held a Climate Change Summit in Copenhagen to attempt to set world policy standards for greenhouse gas emissions. The United States and China were the principle players as the two top green-house-gas-producing countries. The summit ended without a

comprehensive agreement. At the Summit in Cancun in 2010 the nations focused on refining the technical details of the goals established at Copenhagen and re-affirmed their pledges to lower emissions, but postponed any major decisions in how this was to be accomplished.

Part 1 in this series, Podcast 35 explained why the proposals of both the US and China at Copenhagen and Cancun were self-serving and why neither could expect the other to agree with them. Today, Part 2 in the series, Podcast 36, provides a rationale for an alternative world standard that is equally fair to both countries. And Part 3 in the series, Podcast 37, will explain why neither the US nor China have been able, politically, to reach an agreement, and it will provide the means for achieving mutual cooperation.

Part II: An Alternative Perspective that Is Equally Fair

The resolution of the impasse rests on a definition of the issues about global warming and CO₂ emissions that will yield a world standard that is not simply a self-serving distortion of the knowledge provided by the environmental sciences. Creating this alternative standard requires taking into account three additional concepts beyond the absolute levels of GDP and CO₂ emissions which have defined the terms of reference in the negotiations to date. They are: “Ecological Footprint,” “bio-capacity” and “overshoot.”

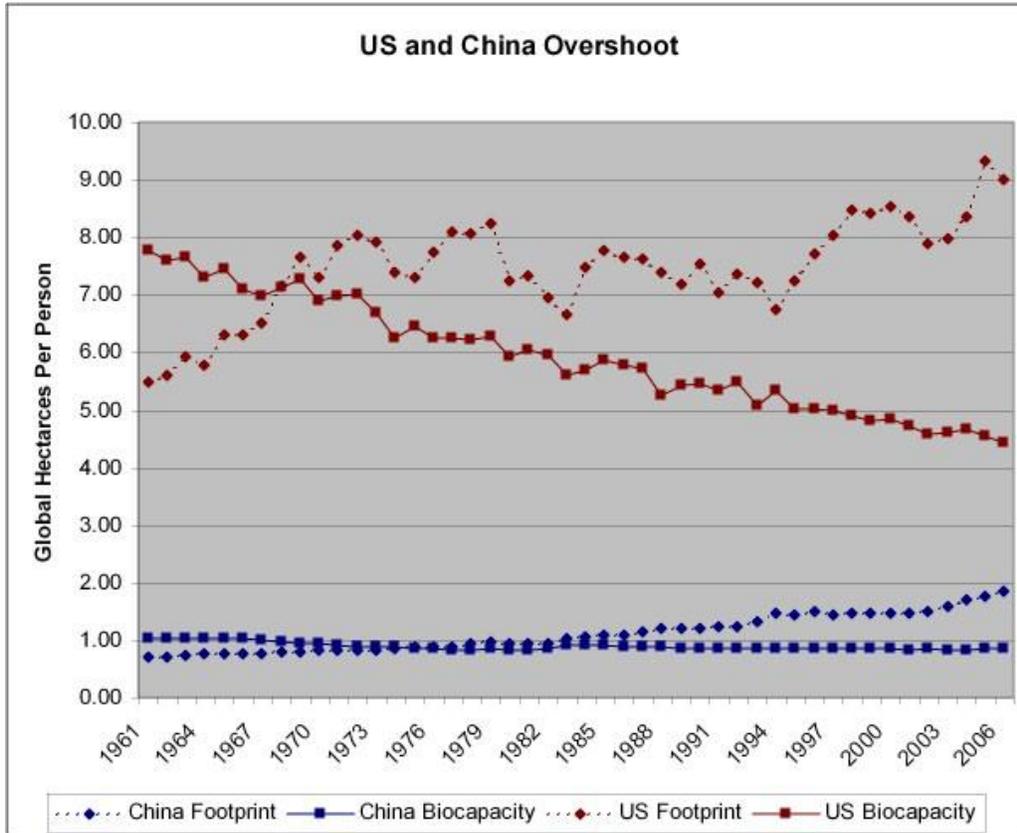


Figure 1. National Footprint Accounts Data from Global Footprint Network: www.footprintnetwork.org

The Ecological Footprint is a measure of humanity’s demand on nature. It measures how much land and water area a human population requires to produce the resources it consumes and to absorb its wastes. Bio-capacity is measured by calculating the amount of biologically productive land and sea area available to provide the resources a population consumes and to absorb its wastes. Overshoot is when a country has a larger Ecological Footprint than their biocapacity. Both the United States and China are in “overshoot” situations (Figure 1).³

Although China is now the leader in the absolute level of CO₂ emissions, as was noted in Part 1, their relative Footprint is still well below the level of the United States (Figure 1). The absolute magnitude of the per capita Footprint is nearly five times larger for the US than it is for China. The US and other developed countries have been depleting the planet’s resources longer and faster than China and the other developing countries. Each is the world leader of the group they represent.

It is for this reason that a per capita index must also be a central part of any alternative perspective. If everyone in the world lived as the people in the US, it would take 5 planets to support human life. The deficits created by overshoot have been made up by depleting the resources of other countries, most particularly, undeveloped countries such as Columbia and the Congo. Thus, the underdeveloped nations, as creditors, have a legitimate claim on the US’s long standing overshoot due to consumption and on China’s emerging overshoot due to growth in GDP. The

least developed nations, whose resources are being consumed, want and deserve compensation for participating in a global solution. The simple arithmetic is that we cannot continue to destroy the biocapacity of the earth without crashing the planet.

In practical terms “the quality of life is a production cost” means both the US and China must start paying off the creditor nations and begin to reduce and then eliminate their overshoot. However, *the way each country would be able to do this is very different due to their unique status in the global economy as either a Developed or Developing nation.*

The United States must “pay backwards.” Given the US has a declining share of the world’s GDP (described in Part 1) and its huge long standing ecological debit (Figure 1), the US only has the capacity to pay back its debit by reducing its Footprint. Whereas, China only has the capacity to keep its ecological debit from growing by paying forward. *Thus, a comprehensive agreement on a World Standard must be defined in terms of the outcome to be achieved, not by a common means for doing so.* To be fair, the amount of paying backwards by the US should match the amount of paying forward by China.

The immediate challenge is to expand the frame of reference for worldwide climate control standards at Durban in 2011 beyond the limited concepts of absolute emission levels or intensities of GDP that defined the previous summits. For any proposal to be feasible it must first be fair, such as proportionally linking paying backward by the US with paying forward by China over a negotiated time span, say by 2030. But, that alone is not sufficient condition. In addition, a larger perspective must be adopted which makes this solution politically acceptable.

Such a perspective is provided in the next podcast, Part 3 in the series on Climate Change negotiations. I will discuss how to escape the dilemma of making the proposed alternative solution politically acceptable. We do not want the final reframe to read we are *taking it (greenhouse gases) to the limit, **one** last time.*

¹ This essay is based on an audio and video podcast by Professor Renner entitled “**Forums for a Future**.” Text, audio and video copies of the material may be accessed from his website at www.kerenner.com. The direct link for subscribing to the video series from iTunes is:

<http://phobos.apple.com/WebObjects/MZStore.woa/wa/viewPodcast?id=289289719>

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https://learn.usf.edu/webapps/lobj-podcast-bb_bb60/feed/IDH3400.004S11/podcast.xml

³ Global Footprint Network <http://www.footprintnetwork.org>