

Reconsidering Growth



By Phillip Meintzer

Note from the author: In planning the Autumn 2023 issue of AWA's Wild Lands Advocate magazine, AWA staff were asked to consider what a utopian, sustainable Alberta might look like in the future if we (and the rest of Canada, or the world at large) were successful in meeting our climate and biodiversity targets. As part of this challenge, I wanted my own piece of writing to examine how we might get there in the first place, and what barriers must be overcome to ensure a sustainable human relationship with the natural world.

To resolve our environmental crises, we must reconsider growth.

Countries around the world have signed onto numerous multi-national treaties, frameworks, and agreements intended to help humanity address intersecting global crises such as (but not limited to) climate change, biodiversity loss, and ocean acidification that have been brought on by the crossing of numerous Earth system boundaries or tipping points. These are boundaries that have been relatively stable for millennia throughout the Holocene (our current geological epoch) prior to the onset of industrialization, and their stability allowed for the development of contemporary human societies as we know them today. A consistent climate, year over year, is necessary for reliable agriculture, for example.

With respect to climate change, some of these commitments include ensuring that greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions peak by 2025 at the latest, are cut by 43 to 50 percent by 2030, and that we reach net-zero emissions by 2050. These are targets informed by science and are intended to ensure that the global average temperature does not increase by more than 1.5°C by the year 2100 to limit the most harmful impacts of future climate changes that are likely to occur if we exceed 1.5°C.

In the case of biodiversity, the recently

signed Kunming-Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework states that signatories hope to recover and conserve 30 percent of all land and waters (both marine and freshwater) by 2030 (frequently referred to as “30 by 30”), to enhance the integrity, connectivity, and resilience of all ecosystems by 2050, and to halt and reverse the extinction rate of all known-threatened species tenfold by 2050.

While these are noble goals in their intentions, they are meaningless without any associated real-world actions that begin to shift the needle towards a more sustainable human relationship with the environment. Yes, these goals are attainable in theory, but if we are going to repair our ecological rifts it is going to require more than just electing the right government, enacting the perfect slate of policies or regulations, and developing unproven tech. It will necessitate a massive shift in how human society orients itself within the Earth ecosystem that we are a part of, and that we rely on for our own survival.

The interaction between human society and Earth's natural ecosystem (of which we are a part) is mediated by our productive activities (also known as our labour). Through human labour, we interact with the natural environment to meet our needs. This means that human beings and our communities use the products and services of nature to acquire necessities such as food, clothing, and shelter. We meet our needs as a human

society by engaging in production — by interacting with nature — which includes activities such as harvesting medicines, hunting for food, engaging in agriculture, and building shelter.

These are activities that humanity has always had to pursue because without them we wouldn't survive. However, the way that we coordinate these activities can look very different depending on the historical moment and the dominant socio-economic paradigm under which we live. Our productive activities have looked different throughout human history, from primitive hunter-gatherers to early forms of communal egalitarianism, through feudalism, to imperialism, slavery, mercantilism, and even today under capitalism. The ways in which we have organized our activities and societies at large have not been static and are always open to debate and change alongside changing circumstances.

These modes of production play a pivotal role in shaping how our society looks and functions at any given point in our history, and they dictate how we meet our needs. Unfortunately, under our current economic paradigm of neo-liberal monopoly capitalism (also known as “shareholder capitalism”), meeting genuine human needs and maintaining a sustainable relation to the Earth's natural ecosystems are of secondary importance to the singular priority of contemporary human existence — the pursuit of profit growth, regardless of its impacts to



We are increasingly seeing and feeling the impacts of climate change on our daily lives. As natural disasters, such as wildfires (pictured) become more frequent and severe, we should be questioning if the unwavering pursuit of economic growth is compatible with a sustainable future.
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ecosystems.

Profit growth is the primary organizing principle by which contemporary human societies operate under capitalism. And the pursuit of wealth accumulation creates the conditions by which a forest is seen more for its monetary value as timber, rather than as an ecosystem of living organisms that sustains us. If we are going to even attempt to rein in our extractive and exploitative relationship with the natural world, we will first need to rethink the reason why we are pursuing resource extraction in the first place. We will need to reorient our thinking from exchange-value (i.e., is something profitable?) to use-value (i.e., is something useful?).

For example, are we cutting down trees in a sustainable way to meet genuine human needs (e.g., to build affordable housing), or are we clearcutting old-growth forests to increase shareholder dividends for a multinational logging company? If the boundless growth of profits is society's primary goal, then there

will be no end to the continued robbery of the Earth's natural resources. The flawed assumption that infinite growth is possible in a world of finite resources is one of the foundational contradictions inherent to the capitalist economy. Even the way we think and talk about Earth's ecosystems as "resources" seems to reflect a backward notion that these things exist solely for our trade and consumption. To achieve our climate and biodiversity goals, we must first begin by questioning the assumptions that unlimited growth is possible and is inherently good.

Even Canada's own political leaders fail to understand the contradiction between growth and environmental sustainability. Speaking at a presentation on June 5 regarding the wildfires raging across the country, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said "There are some politicians that still think you can have a plan for great jobs and growing the economy without having a plan to fight climate change ... But Canadians know that fighting

climate change is necessary both to create those great jobs and opportunities but also to prevent the catastrophic and expensive losses that Canadians are facing increasingly over the years." The disconnect is made evident here by Trudeau's insistence on the need for a growing economy, without recognizing how growth is part of the problem we should be trying to resolve. Wildfires are becoming worse and more frequent because of hotter, drier conditions, a product of climate change driven by rising GHG emissions — the direct result of a profitable fossil fuel industry.

According to data presented in Canada's Ministry of Natural Resources (NRCan) 2022-23 *Energy Factbook*, between 2000 and 2020, GHG emissions from oil and gas production increased by 15 percent, largely driven by increased production in the oilsands. During this period, the emissions from oilsands production more than tripled. Research published in *Environmental Research Letters* by

Kristina Dahl, et al., in May 2023, found that heat-trapping pollution, produced by 88 fossil fuel producers and cement manufacturers, was responsible for historical increases in global temperatures, which in turn, has been responsible for wildfires that have burned nearly 20 million acres across Canada and the United States since 1986. This study directly links the emissions produced by the fossil fuel and cement industries to the destruction of forests by wildfires.

Kevin Anderson, one of the leading British climate scientists and the deputy director of the Tyndall Institute for Climate Research has stated that an analysis [conducted by the Tyndall Institute] suggests that to remain below 2°C of global warming, it will require a 10 percent reduction per year in GHG emissions by the world's wealthiest (and largest emitting) nations — including Canada — and that a reduction of this scale is incompatible with economic growth. Evidence shows that a decrease in GHG emissions by more than one percent per year is typically associated with economic recessions, which reinforces the difficulty of achieving climate goals in a world that's dedicated to growth. Meanwhile, oilsands companies in Canada reported a combined \$34.7 billion in profits in 2022 alone, more than double what they earned the previous year, while still pursuing new and/or expanded mines, such as Suncor's planned expansion into the McClelland Lake Wetland Complex.

There are many who would argue that we need profitable companies to ensure that there are more jobs available for workers (and therefore thriving communities), but available data suggests otherwise. Despite the recent profits cited above, Alberta witnessed a loss of roughly 10,000 jobs in the oil and gas sector in March 2023 alone. And, as of January 2023, Statistics Canada reported that nearly 50,000 Alberta oil and gas jobs had been lost since 2014. Again, during the midst of a profitable energy boom in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, new Suncor CEO Rich Kruger recently announced plans to cut 1,500 jobs at Suncor under the guise of "efficiency," having recorded \$1.8 billion in profits in the first quarter of 2023

alone. Profitability is not a guarantee of sustainable and dependable employment.

Ignorance towards Earth's tipping points and the ecological limits to growth has led to the development of technological, market-based "solutions" to the climate and biodiversity crises, such as carbon capture and storage (CCUS), eco-labelling, mono-crop tree planting, and the recently debunked carbon offset industry — collectively referred to here as the greenwashing industry. These are capitalist "Band-Aids" that create entirely new industries designed to profit off the environmental rift created by profiteering in the first place. These proposed solutions only exist to enable business-as-usual growth scenarios, without ever questioning the system of production and accumulation itself. The greenwashing industry has no interest in seeking to resolve the root cause of these intersecting crises in the first place — unfettered growth — and the associated production of waste and environmental degradation driven by the pursuit of endless profits.

Failing to recognize the role of growth has led many people to criticize or condemn corporations and their CEOs for their greed when they have a fiduciary duty to return profits to their shareholders. When we expect a return on our own personal investments, that only reinforces the continued demand for growth. Regardless of my opinion of those who have made their fortune at the expense of the environment, I do feel that when billionaires are criticized as if their personal greed or lack of morals is the sole reason for environmental issues, that misdirects our collective outrage away from the system of wealth accumulation that enables the creation of billionaires in the first place.

To achieve any real success with respect to our targets, we need to challenge the hegemonic supremacy of capital accumulation and unlimited economic growth, and we need to accept the existence of natural limits to Earth system processes (and/or ecosystems) as informed by the best available western science and Indigenous traditional knowledge developed over generations of living in harmony with the land.

To paraphrase the late Dr. Betty Bastien, a Blackfoot woman from the Piikani First Nation, University of Calgary professor, and author of *Blackfoot Ways of Knowing*: Indigenous ways of knowing are the processes that align Niitsitapi (people) with their relationships to the natural world. All knowledge is generated for the purpose of maintaining our relationships, not just for humanity's sake but for balance and sustainability in all our relations. Niitsitapi ways of knowing are part of a holistic practice of balancing ourselves within our environment. Although this is only the perspective of a single Indigenous culture, it represents a perspective by which a particular human society sought to live in balance with the world around them, in stark contrast to the way we live today. Indigenous worldviews such as those of the Blackfoot, if considered, could provide us with a framework for a sustainable future, where balance, not growth, becomes our shared goal as a species.

Once we have reconsidered our relationship to growth, only then will we be enabled to reorient our economy — and our society at large — towards achieving alternative goals such as meeting our climate and biodiversity targets and addressing broader human social needs (e.g., housing, education, cost of living, etc.) in a more just and equitable manner. When profit is no longer the driving force of our daily existence, then we are free to use our existing capital (e.g., wealth, knowledge, skills, technology, or infrastructure) and redirect it towards meeting alternative goals. This effort will require a collaborative and planned approach to human activities, which may frighten laissez-faire devotees. But given the imminent threat that these crises pose to the future habitability of our planet, it's imperative that we act with the urgency required of our time, in ways that are similar to how we reoriented our economies during wartime. It is going to take an all-hands-on-deck approach if we are to reach these targets by 2030 and 2050. 🌱