

**Sustainable Living in Malaysia:
Living Well Within the Ecological Limits of Our Planet**

Friday, 15 & Saturday, 16 June 2007, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur

Special Address by Dr. David Meyrick

‘Concluding Thoughts on Ecological Foot-Printing as an Indicator Of Sustainable
Development in Malaysia’

Salutation.

Introduction

My role is to look back over four days of training, presentations and, at times, intense discussions and consider what it all means.

- What were the main messages?
- What are my conclusions of the SLiM Workshop and Conference and of the central question of whether Malaysia is living within the ecological limits of our planet?
- What were the pointers to the way forward?

Clearly, these concluding remarks reflect my own thoughts. I am not claiming that this is how it was rather I am saying that this is how it seemed to me.

Workshop

The Workshop on the first two days introduced the Ecological Footprint. What it is, why it is important, how it is calculated, and what to do with the results.

A dynamic and hard-working group of forty-five participants attended the Workshop many of whom are still here now as we near the end of this fourth day.

Four main messages emerged from the Workshop:

1. The Ecological Footprint is an indicator of sustainable development. It addresses two of the three overarching objectives of sustainable development as set out in the WSSD Plan of Implementation (Johannesburg, 2002, paragraph 2).
2. There is no standard methodology for calculating the Ecological Footprint of a city. More than one hundred cities in developed countries have calculated their Ecological Footprint including London, Cardiff, York, Liverpool, The Hague, Oslo, Vienna, Vancouver and Toronto. Different types of organisations have prepared Ecological Footprints – consultants (e.g. Best Foot Forward Ltd.); research institutes (e.g. Stockholm Environment Institute); universities (e.g. University of British Columbia); and a local authority association (e.g. The Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities).
3. Preparing an Ecological Footprint is not a stand-alone activity. It should be integrated into the Local Agenda 21 process and the sustainability assessment of statutory land use plans.

4. Data represents a big challenge for cities and municipalities in Malaysia who may need to disaggregate data for a larger area or carry out a local survey, e.g. the EPSM neighbourhood survey as described by Randolph Jeremiah.

Conference

The main keynote speaker, Prof. William Rees, a genial Canadian from the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, provided an alarming global perspective. Most of us are too busy with mundane matters in our day-to-day working life to think globally, but Prof. Rees succeeded in lifting our horizons.

Prof. Rees highlighted the global ecological overshoot – a situation that has continued unchecked since the late 1980s. The nub of the problem is growth in population and in the per capita demand for resources (i.e. consumerism). By 2003, mankind was living 22% beyond the Earth's carrying capacity. In his opinion, while the main thrust of the message is not new most people are still in denial blinded by the myth of perpetual global economic growth and rising per capita incomes and consumption. Denial, he believes, would lead to collapse unless there is reason, compassion and massive changes. He argued for reduction in consumption (especially in developed countries), resource efficiency, and the redistribution of economic and ecological wealth without which he questioned whether mankind could survive the 21st century.

Consumerism was a central issue of the Conference. The Ninth 5-year plan states that, "The national consumer policy (2002) empowers consumers to be more aware of their rights as well as to promote consumerism" (paragraph 9.18). But William Rees believed that, "consumerism doesn't make any sense." Mr. Lee Kian Foh and Ir Gurmurt Singh argued that the Federal Government should influence consumption and set an example through green purchasing.

There seemed to be uncertainty among some speakers and participants whether government has listened to the voice of ecology when preparing its 5-year plans, e.g. Dr. Fatimah Kari questioned whether enough has been done to address the ecological cost of growth. Mr S. Muthusamy, Economic Planning Unit, had a difficult brief to defend but you will need his help if the Ecological Footprint is to be identified as a suitable indicator of sustainable development in the next 5-year plan.

I was pleased to see the business community represented in one of the panel sessions (BURSA Malaysia). Partnerships are fundamental to achieving sustainable development. In Europe, business and the environment co-exist and there has been some progress through collaboration. By way of examples, there has been greater transparency in companies' annual reports about the environmental impact. Major companies jointly established a Secretariat in Brussels so that the business community can influence draft EU environmental legislation.

Conclusions

I propose selectively to identify five conclusions:

1. The global situation in relation to the natural resource base of economic and social development is more serious than I ever imagined. If a world-renowned academic publicly questions the survival of mankind beyond the year 2100, we have to sit up and take notice.

2. Malaysia is living beyond the ecological limits of our planet. The country's Ecological Footprint is 2.2 global hectares (gha) and the global bio-capacity is 1.8 gha. Whilst I acknowledge that Malaysia may have a national ecological reserve (Living Planet Report 2006), these data need verification.
3. It would help national and international efforts to work towards sustainability if cities and municipalities in Malaysia were to calculate their Ecological Footprint. So far as I am aware, the Footprint is the only tool available for measuring whether a city is living within the Earth's carrying capacity. In passing, I would mention that it is not a case of either adopting green GDP accounting or the Ecological Footprint. Green GDP focuses on the stock of land and natural resources within Malaysia. The Ecological Footprint is concerned with the demand for biologically productive land and water throughout the world (i.e. it allows for trade between countries).
4. The Ecological Footprint would be a suitable indicator of sustainable development for inclusion in their 5-year plan.
5. Awareness-raising and environmental education campaigns help to create an environmental-friendly culture.

The way forward

I fully accept that *you* will decide how best to take this EPSM initiative forward. I merely set out below some thoughts and ideas that have occurred to me as I have listened to the speakers and the discussion at the Workshop and the Conference.

- Try to persuade the Federal Government that the Ecological Footprint should be included in the 5-year plan as an indicator of sustainable development.
- Urge cities and municipalities to calculate their Ecological Footprint.
- Link the Ecological Footprint to the Local Agenda 21 process and to statutory land use planning.
- Urge the Federal Government to undertake a small pilot project at the city/municipal level so that lessons can be learned.
- Take soundings with a number of donor agencies, e.g. the Global Environment Facility/ UNDP, the Danish Government.
- Establish a link with the Global Footprint Network (standards committee) in the event that funding for a pilot project is forthcoming
- Develop a partnership for Ecological Foot-printing among governments, academia, the business community and civil society.
- Continue to raise public awareness about the need to change the mindset and the lifestyle of each and every householder.
- Press the appropriate bodies to include the Ecological Footprint in university curricula for economics, environmental management, civil engineering, town planning and geography.
- EPSM should continue to champion the cause of Ecological Foot-printing.

Final thanks

EPSM, and especially Datin Susheila McCoy, are to be congratulated on convening this Workshop and Conference and on raising the profile of the Ecological Footprint. To the best of my knowledge, SLIM is among the first conference on the Ecological Footprint to be held in Asia.

End.