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Measuring Sustainability with Our Ecological Footprint

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by **Whitney Bauman** (Florida International University)

The ecological footprint (discussed in terms of the library profession on page 28) is a measure of how much land and water area a human population (or individual) requires to produce the resources it consumes and to absorb its wastes on an annual basis. The result of this assessment — a simple quiz — provides the number of Earths that would be necessary to support a given lifestyle.

The concept of the "ecological footprint" (EF) was developed in 1996 by **Mathis Wackernagel** and **William Rees** and outlined in *Our Ecological Footprint*. It suggests that in order to tread lightly on the Earth, we must measure our true footprint, which includes energy and resource consumption. **Wackernagel** and Rees developed a measurement tool — a quiz, available at *http://www.myfootprint.org* — that calculates the ecological footprint of individual humans and organizations (such as businesses, communities, cities, and countries). At the end of the assessment, one is told how many Earths would be needed if everyone on the planet lived a certain way. The concept of the ecological footprint depends upon the theory of limited resources or a limited carrying capacity (the limit to how much human consumption of resources is possible without some sort of eco-systemic collapse) of the Earth. The measurement is based upon the acres of biologically productive area it would take to sustain a population that uses X amount of resources.

Though there has been some controversy over what "carrying capacity" is, it has aided in the development of methods for offsetting carbon emissions for activities such as flying and driving. Though there are environmental justice issues related to offsetting emissions, the tool is effective for use in many communities. (Carbon offsetting does not take into account the distribution of environmental ills: one power plant that does not use all of its pollution credits could sell its credits to another plant so that it could pollute more than its alloted credits. Some communities would then have to deal with higher amounts of pollution than others.)

The tool assumes a certain level of resource use, but the question remains whether or not that level of resource use is necessarily conducive to human and nonhuman progress and whether or not a specific level of resource use can or should be used for all 6-plus billion people on the planet. Does sustainability, according to the ecological footprint measure, smuggle in some normative assumptions about what "the good life" is that fails to take into account the diversity of peoples and environments on the planet?

On the one hand, the ecological footprint is a valuable yardstick for measuring the absurdity of the consumer lifestyle. On the other hand, the tool is rife with scientific and ethical lacunae. For example, there is no doubt that Vice President **Al Gore** has a huge footprint, given that he travels all over the world to deliver his message about global climate change. But is not this very message intended to change people's lives toward living in more sustainable ways? The EF does not take into account these complexities. As another example, would the very development of the EF by **Wackernagel** and **Rees** be within the "one planet" scenario of sustainability? Probably not, given that the idea and tool were developed over several conferences, and its very dissemination depends upon the energy necessary to run a computer with an Internet browser and connection. In a sense, the legacy of the EF still remains to be seen, but its message is clear: We must stop living as if there is more than the one planet upon which we live. 🌳

*Adapted from the **Berkshire Encyclopedia of Sustainability**, Volume 1. (Berkshire 2010.)*

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different devices. I agree. How many numbers and passwords can a person remember? And how many times do we need to buy the same book regardless of how wonderful it is! Case in point – I want to show *Ferdinand the Bull* (one of my favorite children's books of all time) to grandson **Trifon**! But, alas, it is not yet on the **Nook**. So, paper it is!

Have y'all seen the second **Aptara eBook survey**? **Aptara** surveyed more than 600 trade, professional and educational publishers this summer. It was the second in a series of surveys designed to document the evolving impact of eBooks on publishing. Key findings: a) The greatest eBook production challenge is still eReader/content compatibility issues. Even with the near universal **EPUB** format standard, today's **fragmented eReader market** makes quality eBook production a moving target, requiring manual manipulation to retain consistent formatting across device-types. b) Publishers are strug-

Something to Think About — Anything Goes!

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No matter what things you choose to do at the Charleston Conference, it is always a winner. From year to year I have planned my activities carefully to be able to contact vendors, give presentations, hear others present, and take in a few special events. I also try to leave time to visit small shops in the city around Francis Marion Square. Most years I have been able-bodied and have sprinted from venue to venue in the various hotels where sessions are happening.

This year I was a little concerned because I had a fractured knee. Knowing the area fairly well, I tried to choose my paths to coincide with elevators and very few steps or uneven passages. It was an ADA adventure! Unless you have a power chair, there is no advantage to being disabled. The whole time is like a slow motion film where you are trying to catch up with the speeding train and looking for someone to run over you. Needless to say, I got to sessions too late for a seat, and chivalry is virtually dead, folks. I am now dancing through a myriad of email addresses to locate Powerpoints or other information to help me. We are all looking to fill the gaps in our information banks.

I did find that most of my conference life was built around stationary pauses, and people were able to find me better. Friends from earlier conferences spent good conversational time with me, and I had some nice discussions about cutting edge problems, as well as offering new ideas about special registration charges for retirees, talking with editors about changes in the writing processes and plans for future meetings. I was able to find more of the "First-Timers" and help them through a few logistics. That always pleases me. I learned a great deal about libraries that were unfamiliar to me, and that also filled my brain with new information. Each conference is very different from the others and is marked by very meaningful events. This year I renewed old acquaintances and found some new ones. It was exciting! The theme rang true for me — Anything Goes! How was your adventure? Something to think about? 🌳