

Op-Ed

Commodity Frontiers Initiative Coordinator, Ulbe Bosma, reflects on the WWF's "Living Planet Report 2020" and the long history of capitalism

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The countryside has been a crucial but also underappreciated driver of capitalist growth, which indeed explains the rationale of the Commodity Frontiers Initiative (CFI). The world's countryside is more over the place where, until recently, most people have lived and where the overwhelming majority of living organisms still reside. The countryside has always been ruled by a precarious equilibrium of many different species, a balance that has, however, become radically upset over the past centuries. In order to provide rapidly growing human societies with the necessary food and raw materials, flatlands, valleys, mountains, forests, savannahs, wetlands, lakes and seas of the world have been transformed at astonishing speed.

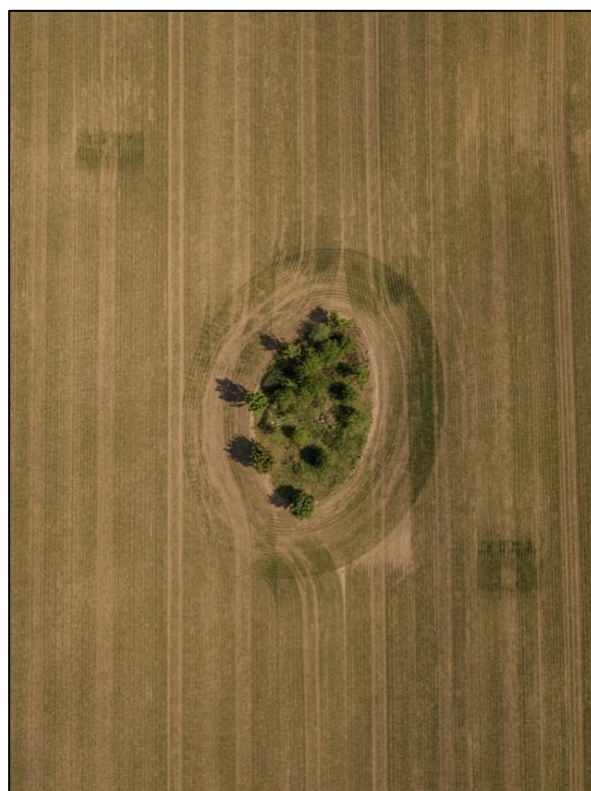


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Obviously, CFI is just one and certainly not the most prominent among the agencies, networks and research initiatives that has made concerns about global environmental transformation the focus of their work. Recently, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) published its [*Living Planet Report 2020*](#) to give us a wake-up call about the pace at which our global economy has been destroying nature:

Since the Industrial Revolution human activities have increasingly destroyed and degraded forests, grasslands, wetlands and other important ecosystems, threatening human well-being (p.6).

Based upon the research of an impressive line-up of scientists, the *Living Planet Report 2020* concludes that the world has lost 68 percent of its vertebrates over the past half century. In the report's introduction WWF's Director General Marco Lambertini puts the blame not only on modes of production and consumption patterns but also on dominant economic orthodoxies:

The way we produce and consume food and energy, and the blatant disregard for the environment in our current economic model, has pushed the natural world to its limits (p. 4).

This outspoken rejection of the "current economic model" is remarkable for an organization whose objectives are not at all served by making ideologically charged judgements. This judgement is made, however, harshly and repeatedly:

A key problem is that mismatch between the artificial 'economic grammar', which drives public and private policy and 'nature's syntax' which determines how the real world operates (p. 98).

The WWF report makes the pointed argument that dominant economic schools do not consider biodiversity as an economic asset but something that is beyond the realm of scarcity. It is an economic reasoning that assumes we can continue producing and consuming as if we had 1.56 planet Earths at our disposal (p.56).

This scholarly logic underpins our "current economic model," allowing for the externalization of social and ecological costs, while perpetuating unequal social and ecological exchange; many would say these are simply inherent to capitalism. Although neither the word "capitalism" nor "ecological injustice" are mentioned in the above WWF report, in substantive terms, the report's assessment comes close to taking on both. It observes that while high income countries protect their nature, they add to their consumption by "nature's contributions imported from lower-income countries, which are sometimes surrendered for little economic growth" (p. 52).

The supply chains through which these transactions take place are often dominated by large corporations, the WWF report notes. This is unavoidable, one might add, because of the sheer scale of the current exploitation of nature. It is crucial to note, moreover, that we are talking about transnational agricultural corporations, of which quite a few use their considerable economic and political weight to engage in large-scale landgrabbing. Half of the loss of the world's fauna is the consequence of a massive expansion of unsustainable agriculture, according to the WWF report. Although mining and industry are responsible for environmental destruction and dispossession too, it is particularly the spatial expansion of the agricultural

commodity frontiers that ruins our biodiversity.

The WWF report's aim is not only to make us more aware of the immensity of the irreversible catastrophe we are heading at but also to show that we can change course. "Bending the Curve" is the subtitle of the report and a key recommendation in this regard is to encourage economic modelling that considers biodiversity as a crucial source of future economic growth. The report emphasizes that scenarios to bend the curve are available and feasible without endangering food security. It seems a perfectly reasonable position, but also one that relies on the political determination of the international community of states and hence, is surrounded by question marks. Why should actors such as transnational corporations and states change their behavior tomorrow when they've already known for half a century that the current economic model is not sustainable? In order to bend the curve, we need to know what historical forces have shaped it. The report identifies the Industrial Revolution as the starting point of the rapid ecological deterioration of the Earth, but

this historical phenomenon is neither an economic model nor can it be considered as the starting point of ecological degradation. The rapid deforestation of the Baltic countries for western European construction and shipbuilding, for example, began as early as the late Middle Ages. It was of structural importance for the economy of Holland, identified by the prominent economic historians Jan de Vries and Ad van der Woude as the "world's first modern economy".¹

It is the very long curve of global capitalism, spanning 600 years, which has created tremendous human progress but also unfathomable concentrations of power and wealth, which in turn have evoked heroic attempts to create better and more equitable worlds. On its march through history capitalism has shown an incredible adaptability, which in a way is good news because it might offer us the wiggle room to bend the curve towards a more equitable and ecologically responsible world. Any scenarios that can help us to do so require, however, a deep understanding of the history of capitalism that has drawn the shape of this curve.

¹ Jan Vries and Ad van der Woude. 1997. *The first modern economy: success, failure, and perseverance of the Dutch economy, 1500-1815*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.



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