



Advice to Pres. Obama (#6): Beware the Hungry Ghosts

Posted by [Jason Bradford](#) on January 28, 2009 - 10:13am

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This article is one of a [series of articles](#) offering energy advice to President Obama and his administration.

January 2009

Dear President Obama,

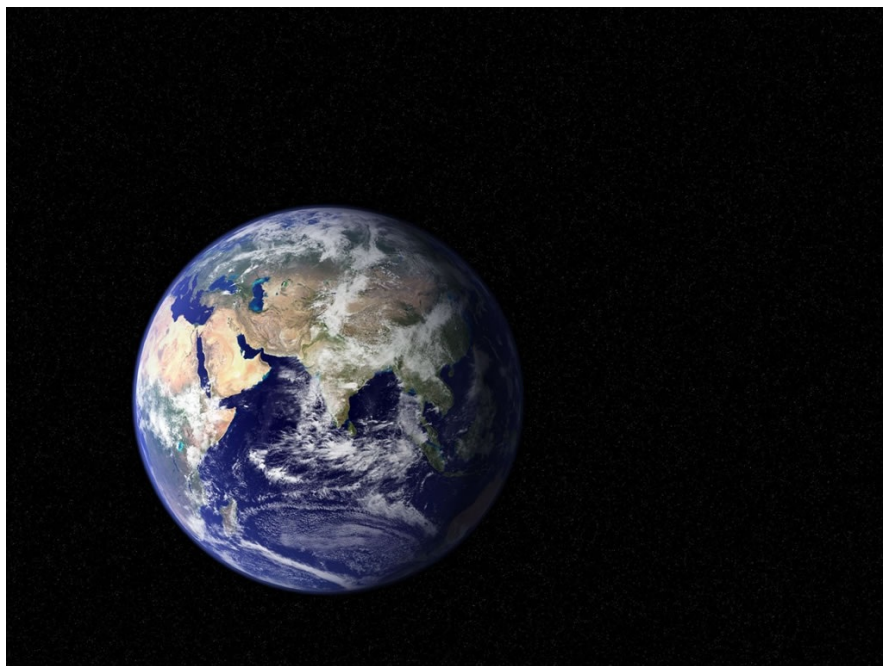
You don't know me personally, but we have a few things in common. Like you, I became a community organizer after earning an advanced degree (my doctorate is in biology). Thanks for dramatically elevating the status of my current work. I was also elected president once, though that was over twenty years ago while I was in high school. Our children are about the same age (my pair are boys) and I especially enjoyed watching yours during the inauguration, imagining what an adventure this must be for them.

The theme of your campaign was hope. Quite honestly, I don't have a whole lot of hope for my children's future, and that's why I am doing something as audacious as writing you a letter. I am a worker, not a big complainer, and I will suggest some concrete steps that would make me hopeful. But first I want to connect hope to something else, realism.

Hope begins by facing the truth because decisions made in a state of denial are likely to be poor ones. Sometimes, truth is painful, and so hope may only arise through a path of disillusionment. Our country has been living in a state of denial for a long, long time, and now many are disillusioned. My question is: Will you lead a process of truth telling? Are we going to stop scapegoating and over-simplifying our troubles, and get to the core of our predicament? We may have to shed a lot of healing tears along the way, but people are waiting for this.

The Predicament

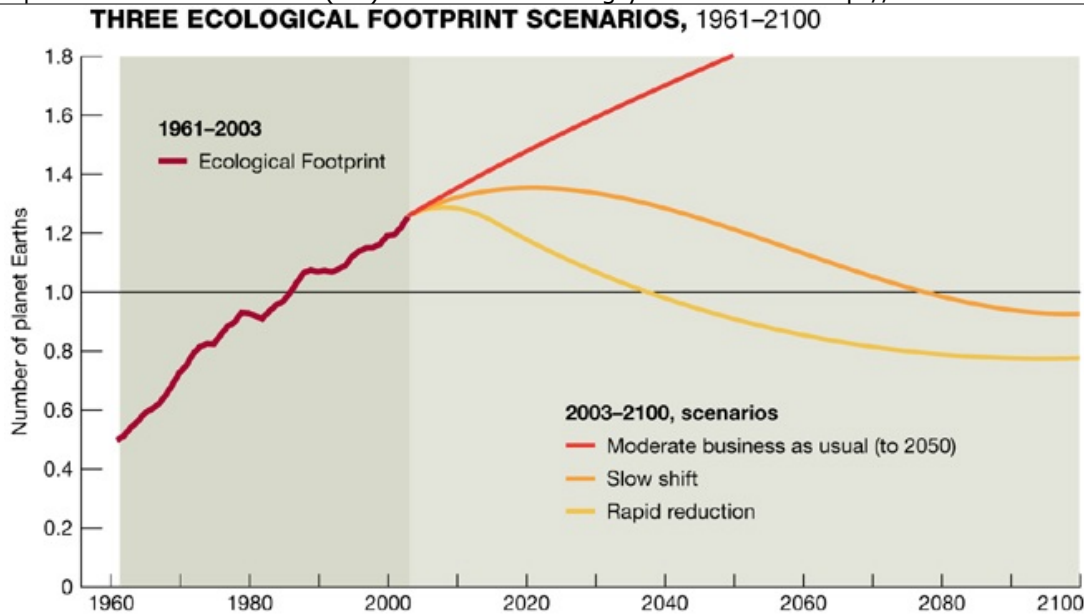
As a scientist my job is to sort out the rules of the universe, but most of my expertise is limited to planet Earth. The trouble I see is that the laws, policies, codes, habits and various behaviors of *Homo sapiens* are incompatible with keeping the planet suited to our habitation. As a lawyer you are aware of the phrase: "The constitution is not a suicide pact." If that is the case, your oath of office permits you make sure, above all else, that social norms are in alignment with the laws of nature. After all, nature doesn't negotiate. Furthermore, a primary role of government is to protect the commons from assault or corruption. Governments also strive to protect private property and individual liberties. When these two functions of government are at odds, one must be given primacy. We all know that private interests tend to fund politics, but it is well past the hour to stand up for the commons above all else, or everybody—rich and poor—will lose.



What an amazing gift of perspective we have, to see the planet from space. Clearly, the United States of America is only one territory on Earth. The relationship between our nation and the Earth is a nested one, meaning the Earth contains our nation. Here's the rub. The same nested relationship holds to the global economy. All economic activity is nested within, and wholly dependent upon, the biological, geological, climatological and hydrological systems of the Earth. What we do to the Earth we do to ourselves.

Why is the economy collapsing right now? In the news we see the problems reported as a process of "deleveraging" following a "bubble," and that we ran up too much "debt" relative to our "balance of trade" and long-term prospects for "GDP growth." This is all true, but only hints at what lies underneath. When I step back and put on my biological goggles it is a much bigger story. In reality, the rules of finance and commerce do not recognize the simple and obvious fact that the economy is a subset of the Earth. Our predecessors mistakenly created monetary and political systems that drove humanity into ecological overshoot. The most worrying debts are not financial, but ecological. Financial debts can be forgiven; ecological ones need true repayment.

Let me explain. Look at the graph below of the Ecological Footprint. The human impact on the planet has risen in parallel with the growth of the economy. This is no co-incidence, but a function of rising population and consumption levels that are measured collectively as growth. It has gone way too far.



Perhaps an analogy will drive home this key point of mine. I would hope that my children will grow for another decade, perhaps averaging 10 lbs per year over that period. Then I want them to stop growing. If they don't stop, either something is wrong hormonally and/or they are eating too much. Imagine they keep up the 10 lbs per year rate after they become 20 or so, by the time they reach my current age they will weigh nearly 400 lbs. I happen to weigh the same as I did in college. This is good. You see, I am not "anti-growth" but comprehend the simple fact that physical growth is a phase that eventually ends. To our great detriment, the human economy went past its healthy growth phase and is now so enormous it desperately needs liposuction and a frugal diet plan, or it and its host (the planet) will die.

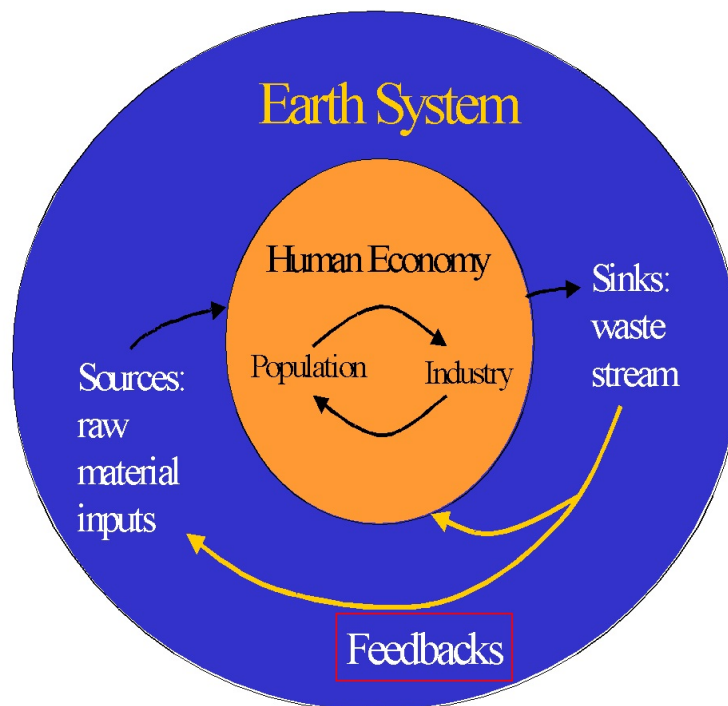
Now the bankers in your administration may say: We must grow the economy or the financial system collapses. They are right! However, I speak as an ecologist (akin to Jane Lubchenco, nice choice there) and ask that you reply to the bankers with: Then create a financial system that doesn't require perpetual growth. Believe me, this is possible, [the theories and models exist](#), and it is easier to do than repealing the laws of physics and ecology.

Okay, if you have followed me so far perhaps it is safe to tell you the following. When I hear you talking about stimulating the economy and rebuilding our roads, honestly, I shudder. Perhaps I don't know you well enough, but my fear is that you are trying to get us onto that red path on the Ecological Footprint graph above, the one labeled "business as usual." Frankly, that is impossible now, and I think you know that. Rapidly "greening" the economy and giving money to governors for their new, "shovel ready," freeway projects are mutually exclusive propositions. I am going to follow the money. Will precious resources be used to perpetuate our national "suicide pact" or will they turn us onto the above-labeled rapid reduction path? Let's face up to it: We can't have it both ways.

More specifically, the economy requires inputs in the form of resources that come from the Earth. Our people and industry use these to make products that are bought and sold in a reinforcing feedback loop (circular flow model). The outputs are wastes that become part of the Earth too. We are in trouble at both ends right now. The inputs are getting more difficult to come by (e.g., fossil fuels, water) and the pollution has accumulated to damaging concentrations (e.g., greenhouse gases, persistent organic compounds). Policies need to recognize limits at both the

Allow me to sink this basket: Wave a magic wand and solve the credit problems. Banks are solvent and consumer confidence is high. Would we have an economic rebound? I seriously doubt it, because money is a claim on source supplies and sink capacities that have reached physical maxima. That's what the Ecological Footprint is showing us with hard, real world numbers, not ethereal financial digits in a database. When more money chases fixed or declining goods the result is inflation that brings demand in line with what is available.

Ecological Economics



How You Could Give Me Hope

I know heaps of ridiculously high expectations are being placed upon you, but allow me to give you five simple, inexpensive and immediate ways that you could provide hope.

1. Convert White House lawns to food gardens. In addition to an assortment of vegetables (imagine fresh arugula whenever you are at home), go ahead and include hens, a beehive, and perhaps a dairy cow (I think you have the space). I am a farmer so I know that getting your nails dirty would be a great compliment to a basketball workout and is fantastic for mental relaxation and acuity. A walk through the garden would likely help during tense negotiations, whether foreign or domestic. But most importantly, this move would give people the message that some degree of self-reliance is good for them and their country.

2. Bring House Rep. Roscoe Bartlett over to your office for a special presentation of his energy talk, make sure your cabinet is there, and present him with an appropriate Presidential Medal of some sort. He's a Republican so this would be a great bipartisan move. He is also a bona fide scientist who can speak with authority on the “source” side of the equation with respect to fossil

3. Invite James Hansen and his wife to stay in the Lincoln bedroom. Keep him around long enough to personally be assured that you understand his positions and reasoning. He believes substantive changes in energy policy need to happen within your first term or the planet is toast. Unfortunately, I think he's right.
4. Place Herman Daly as a key economic advisor. So far your economic team looks to me like the same folks who created the mess. I have absolutely no confidence in them. Much of the banking system is a black hole that is insolvent and unredeemable. By contrast, the hundreds of billions (soon to be trillions?) of dollars wasted in shoring up banks could help pay down our ecological debts if allocated wisely. Maybe you are going to tell these guys to do a pirouette and reform themselves and their ilk?
5. Develop a "Securing the Basics" plan. With the economy tanking, the risk of civil unrest, both here and abroad, is real. Because we are mostly a society of urban and suburban consumers, households in the U.S. must pay for basic goods. The extreme income inequity in the U.S. is an additional vulnerability. Lack of self-reliance means that if oil imports are cut off suddenly or commerce falters due to a cascade of credit failures, the very necessities of life such as food, water, and shelter may be lost to tens of millions of citizens. If the population knew that a credible plan existed to mitigate for such a catastrophe, ensuring fair and timely distribution of goods, it would reduce the likelihood that panic would set in. Over the long-term, a society that is not so import-dependent, especially for food and energy, should be a policy goal.



Tell you what. If you do these five steps I'll invite you onto my radio show, called [The Reality Report](#), and you can have plenty of time on local public radio to tout these early accomplishments. :-)

Overcoming the Hungry Ghost Syndrome

Several religious traditions describe what are termed "hungry ghosts." These sad beings have insatiable appetites, with tiny mouths and huge stomachs. Modern society creates hungry ghosts

among the living. We “have” more than ever, but are constantly bombarded with messages that it is never enough. The poor go to dollar stores, the middle class spend hours at Bed Bath and Beyond, the rich buy ever larger yachts, and city planners are always looking for more land and water in which to expand their urban sphere. Wants have become indistinguishable from needs. I anxiously walk among our nation of hungry ghosts, asking myself what these addicts will do when they can't get their fix? I am afraid of what they will think of you eventually. They expect you to turn things around so they can feed on more and more and more, but this is impossible. Will they come to despise you when the "economic stimulus plan" fails to stimulate them?



Like obese junk-food junkies, our addiction to consuming the planet will lead to an untimely death for most of us if we can't stop it. Many of us know we are addicts but need social reinforcement to change. This is where great political leadership can really help. Your inauguration ceremony suggested to me you may accept this role. Your speech and the poem spoke of the hard times ahead and the value of a life of honest work, friends and family. Social scientists and neurobiologists know where addiction comes from and what can be done to break it. Once we “hit bottom” it could be amazing to see and feel a nation regain a sense of purpose and direction again. Greater systemic fairness, social equity, and honest communication will be crucial to our revival. I am not a politician, and you are a very skilled one. How you lead us away from the hungry ghost syndrome I leave to you.

While I want hope, I fear it will never come. My life feels like it is taking place on a runaway train. My friends, family and all I hold dear are on this train with me while it careens towards destruction. But the passengers and driver are apparently oblivious to their peril. They sometimes get angry at me for trying to alert them of the dangers ahead. At some point, because of momentum, it will be too late. Physics will trump hope. I don't want to face that sort of existential crisis; living while aware that we've passed the point of no return. Do you know what I mean?

Can you be fearless? I don't mean this in a reckless sense, arising from delusional, juvenile feelings of immortality, but in a way that comes from a cool and truthful evaluation of a deeply difficult predicament. It has probably been said before, although it now seems truer than ever. We have arrived at a paradoxical point in history where we have nothing to lose, because if we don't act properly then everything is lost.

Sincerely yours,

Jason Bradford
Willits, CA



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