



CHAIRMAN'S REPORT

2017 AGM



In Christopher Stone's seminal 1972 article 'Should Trees Have Standing? –Towards Legal Rights for Natural Objects', he talks about how certain developments through the ages have at times been considered as unthinkable. He provides a memorable quote from a court in Wisconsin refusing a woman the right to practice law as follows:

The law of nature destines and qualifies the female sex for the bearing and nurture of the children of our race and for the custody of the homes of the world ... [A]ll life-long callings of women, inconsistent with these radical and sacred duties of their sex, as is the profession of the law, are departures from the order of nature; and when voluntary, treason against it The peculiar qualities of womanhood, its gentle graces, its quick sensibility, its tender susceptibility, its purity, its delicacy, its emotional impulses, its subordination of hard reason to sympathetic feeling, are surely not qualifications for forensic strife. Nature has tempered woman as little for the juridical conflicts of the court room, as for the physical conflicts of the battlefield ...

Not only were women disqualified from practicing law but it was only relatively recently in most countries that they were entitled to vote. The abolition of slavery was, at the time of its practice, seen as unthinkable. These practices were changed and a reversion to selective franchise and slavery today would be seen as unthinkable. What Stone was writing about in 1972 – legal rights for natural objects – has come to pass in certain parts of the world. Both Bolivia and Ecuador have rights for the environment itself – not human rights to a healthy environment – entrenched in their constitutions. During 2017, in both New Zealand and India, legal rights were ascribed to certain rivers in those countries.

We live in a world of change – some of it radical and so quick that many of us find it difficult to keep up. Some of the change is welcome, some less so. The citizens of both the United States and United Kingdom felt change was necessary and, unfortunately, chose change that was regressive. But what is not changing is humans' ability to control the natural world, as has recently been evidenced in places such as Sierra Leone, India, Texas and, as I write this, the Caribbean. Many of these natural forces are exacerbated by human interventions beforehand. Unfortunately, and too often, humans are failing to heed the voice of nature and continue down the road of damaging environmental behaviour. This is when change is necessary but is not happening, or not happening fast enough.

In 2015, the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were adopted by most of the countries on Earth. The seventeen goals, each of which involves several specific targets, are aimed at ending poverty, protecting the planet and ensuring prosperity for all. That sounds wonderful but, when we look around us (certainly in this country but rest assured that we are not alone in facing these challenges) it is evident that we have a long way to go. But imagine life on Earth where poverty has been eradicated, Earth is being protected and, where necessary, rehabilitated, and people are enjoying increased prosperity across the board. Imagine. As John Lennon says, "It's easy if you try".

If the SDGs are to be achieved, a lot will have to change about how we do things – how we live, how we do business, how we earn, and so on. As the official SDG website says: "For the goals to be reached, everyone needs to do their part: governments, the private sector, civil society and people like you". People like us.

What is WESSA doing? Let us take just two of the seventeen goals as examples. Goal number 4 talks of Quality Education, and achieving inclusive and equitable quality education and promotion of lifelong learning opportunities for all'. This falls squarely within WESSA's current activities – not only Eco-Schools but several other teaching and learning activities, such as our Work Skills programme, involving school children, post-school youth and adults. We need to bear in mind, too, that these

goals are not standalone goals – they are all interrelated, so achievement of quality education will have a positive impact on addressing poverty, for example.

The second goal I wish to mention specifically is Goal Number 15, headed 'Life on Land', and which is aimed at the protection, restoration and promotion of sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainable management of forests, the combating of desertification, and the halt and reversal of land degradation and halting of biodiversity loss. This falls squarely within our 'Ecological and Infrastructure & Sustainability' Programme. By highlighting these programmes, I must not be understood as suggesting that WESSA's other programmes are less important; they are merely selected examples that easily illustrate how WESSA is doing its part to promote a better life for all and for our planet. It would not take an unrealistic stretch of logic to see how WESSA's activities have relevance to most, if not all, of the SDGs, not just the examples I have selected.

Several of WESSA's Board members and I had the opportunity to attend and participate in WESSA's strategic planning meeting held up the North Coast earlier this year. We were privileged to hear the vision of how each of our programmes – those that I have already mentioned as well as ecotourism, youth development and education centres – is facing up to the future and the exciting plans afoot to further our objective of promoting participation in caring for the Earth. I left that meeting convinced that WESSA has the right people to execute the tasks that we have chosen to pursue and, importantly, embrace and take advantage of the change that will be necessary to achieve our goals.

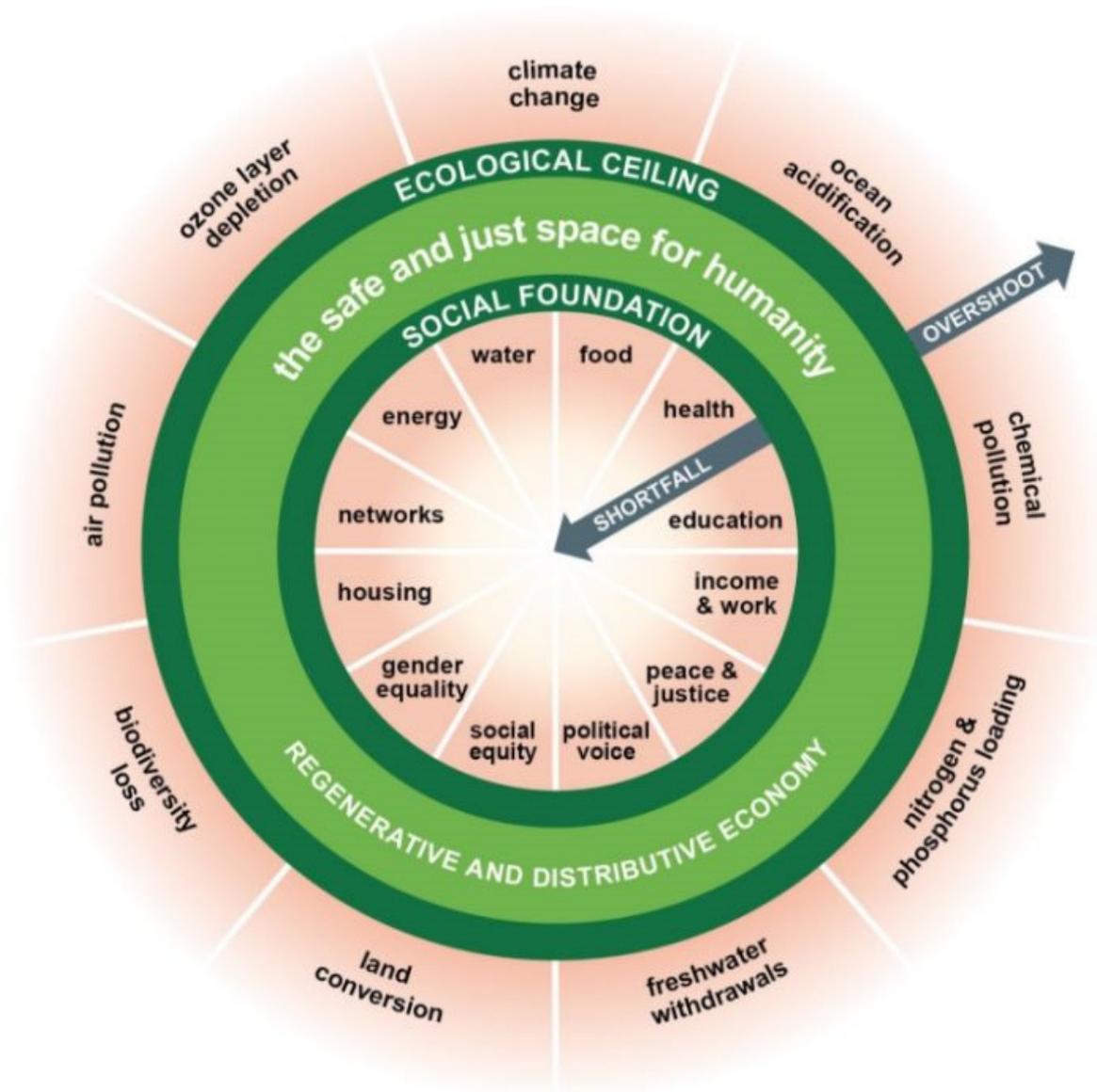
I joined the WESSA Board shortly before my daughter was born and she had her thirteenth birthday yesterday. I have seen tremendous change in the way we do things even if only at the board level. From endless discussions about governance issues that had been already been decided in earlier meetings, and concerns about our familiarity with the financial health of the organization, we have progressed to a situation where we are fully apprised of everything that is happening in the organization, we are tweaking governance issues to ensure that we are up to date with the latest trends and requirements in corporate management, and we have time to examine and think about what WESSA is doing on the ground, which was often lost under the governance merry-go-rounds in the past.

We have a lot for which to thank the Board over the past several years, particularly my predecessor Richard Lewis and his vice-chair for many years, Dianne Perrett, for turning things around at Board level. This has also obviously influenced the way that the organisation functions. Our CEO, Thommie Burger, has been in this position while we have had to make difficult changes to the way we operate, and I believe we have emerged in a healthy and vibrant position. Members of the WESSA Exco – I would mention them all by name if time permitted – are to be commended for the way in which WESSA is currently operating, as I have pointed out above, not to mention the many WESSA staff members contributing within the various programmes and units. I am of the firm opinion that we have many gems in our organization who are adding tremendous value to what we do.

As I mentioned before, the WESSA Board is a very different body to that I joined in 2004. Not only is it more demographically diverse, which is an imperative that we have been pursuing for several years with much success, but I am really fortunate to have Board colleagues who are actively engaged with the organization in relation to their areas of expertise. Several of them put in enormous amounts of work outside the core governance functions that board members are expected to perform. To Howard Henricks, my vice-chair, and the rest of the Board, thank you very much for your support and contribution to WESSA.

There is another constituent of WESSA that is very important to its functioning and which is an essential component of our efforts to meet our principal objective of promoting participation in caring for the Earth. That is our members, many of whom are involved in extremely valuable projects in their respective geographical areas. One of the things that is currently receiving careful attention by the Board is how best to accommodate members within our current operating structures and activities. Once again, this is an area where change in relation to how we have done things in the past is inevitable, but members will be involved in all decisions made in this regard and it is hoped that change will be positive.

I would like to conclude by highlighting an approach to thinking about how we do things in relation to sustainability, social equity and justice that is highly relevant to WESSA's operations. It is called 'Doughnut Economics' and is the brainchild of British economist Kate Raworth. She has combined the ideas of planetary boundaries published by the Stockholm Resilience Institute and the social boundaries informed by the Sustainable Development Goals to come up with a model that resembles the type of doughnut that has a hole in the middle (see diagram below). The appropriate place for humanity to be functioning in our economic, political and other decisions and actions is in the body of the doughnut itself. If we fail to meet the requirements of the social foundation we fall into the doughnut's hole and if we exceed the planetary boundaries we leave the outside of the doughnut. The body of the doughnut itself is the 'safe and just space for humanity' and we must aim to locate ourselves there. This is not an easy task: it will require considerable change in the way we – referring to everyone everywhere and not just WESSA - think and the way we do. Even though Raworth's views are not guiding what WESSA is doing, WESSA's activities fall within the safe and just space for humanity. South Africa has a Constitution that, on paper, supports the doughnut, so our national governance infrastructure supports, in theory, the changes necessary to get ourselves within the safe space. It is an imposing task but one which is not hard to imagine if you try. WESSA is certainly equipped to play an important role in keeping us in the safe space and I am indeed proud to be part of this organization and eagerly look forward to witnessing its efforts in progressing towards a better life for all, including our planet.



Source: <https://www.kateraworth.com/doughnut/>