

# Think PIECE



## 2022 PHABC Annual Conference

**“Our Planet, Our Health: Creating Well-being Societies and Making Peace with Nature”**

**Dr. Trevor Hancock, 26 Oct 2022<sup>1</sup>**

*“A healthy planet is essential to the health and well-being of current and future generations and for enabling all to flourish. Well-being societies prioritize a rapid, just transition to a low-carbon economy . . . provide access to clean energy for all, enhance biodiversity, reduce resource depletion and pollution, support harmonious relations between humans and Nature, and center Indigenous knowledge and leadership.”*

***The Geneva Charter for Well-being, World Health Organization, December 2021***

The theme for this year’s conference comes largely from recent UN and WHO initiatives, and examines their implications for public health practice in BC and elsewhere. It is inspired by the concept of planetary health, by the theme of “Our Planet, Our Health” chosen by WHO for World Health Day 2022, by the focus on Well-being Societies in WHO’s Geneva Charter, and by the importance of Indigenous knowledges in the work of creating a healthy relationship between humans and the Earth.

## Planetary Health in the Age of the Anthropocene

**Planetary Health** was defined by the Rockefeller-Lancet Commission on Planetary Health as “The health of human civilisation and the state of the natural systems on which it depends” (Whitmee et al., 2015). As such, it recognizes that the Earth’s natural systems constitute what a report to the Canadian Public Health Association (2015) called **the ecological determinants of health**. Those determinants include oxygen, water, food, materials, fuels, UV protection, waste removal and recycling and a stable climate. They correspond to a set

of **planetary boundaries** that we should not cross, and yet beyond which we are venturing (Steffen, Richardson et al., 2015) - the result of a combination of population growth, economic growth and growth in the power and reach of our technology.

The massive ecological changes we are experiencing have largely happened since the mid-20th century, which in ecological and geological terms is a mere sliver of time. Accordingly, these rapid changes have been dubbed **the ‘Great Acceleration’** (Steffen, Brodgate et al., 2015b). Indeed, the impact has been so profound that we have created a new geological epoch, **the Anthropocene** (International Commission on Stratigraphy, 2019), characterized by the deposition of new geological strata containing uniquely human minerals (e.g. plastics, cement, glass, pure aluminum, tungsten carbide), unique or abnormally increased chemicals (e.g. CO<sub>2</sub>, nitrogen fertilisers, persistent organic pollutants (POPs), radioactive particles) and a shift in fossil assemblages, with human and domesticated animals replacing wild animals in the future fossil record (Zalasiewicz, 2016; Waters et al., 2016).

## The human dimensions of the Anthropocene

It is important to understand that the Anthropocene is a human-created phenomenon – we are the *anthropos* (the Ancient Greek word for human). As such, having created it, it is up to us to both learn to live in the Anthropocene and to try to slow or even reverse the process and to repair the damage done to the Earth and other species.

But it is also important to understand that when we say it is human-created, it would be much more accurate to say that the Anthropocene has been created by some

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humans, namely high-income countries and people, whose ecological footprints on average in 2018 were equivalent to 3.8 planet's worth of biocapacity (Canada had a footprint of 5.1 Earths). Meanwhile, low income countries had ecological footprints averaging 0.7 Earths and overall, humanity has a footprint of 1.8 Earths (York University Ecological Footprint Initiative . . . 2022). Clearly, high-income countries have to dramatically and rapidly reduce their footprints – in the case of Canada, by 80% – while low-income countries need to increase their footprints in order to secure the level of development needed to ensure basic human needs are met for all.

### **We face a global health crisis**

In December 2020, UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres stated bluntly: “Humanity is waging war on nature. This is suicidal”, adding that “making peace with nature is the defining task of the 21st century. It must be the top, top priority for everyone, everywhere” (Guterres, 2020) – which must surely include public health. Then in February 2021, in its report, “Making Peace with Nature”, the UN Environment Programme noted, “a healthy planet is important for the health and well-being of all people” and identified climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution as a “triple crisis” that threatens well-being (United Nations Environment Programme, 2021).

Global calls for strong responses to this triple crisis continue. In its 2020 *Manifesto for a Healthy Recovery from Covid-19* (WHO, 2020), WHO identified “Protect and preserve the source of human health: Nature” as the first of six ‘prescriptions’, while at COP26 in Glasgow in November 2021, the WHO reaffirmed that “climate change is the single biggest health threat facing humanity” (WHO, 2021a). This same report also notes:

“Healthy human societies are dependent upon biodiversity and healthy ecosystems – as the source of clean air, water, healthy soils, shelter, medicines, food, pollination

and for the regulation of pests, disease, climate and extreme weather events. Human pressures . . . all undermine these services”.

All of these concerns led to WHO’s choice of ‘Our Planet, Our Health’ as the theme for World Health Day on April 7th 2022 (WHO, 2022). This choice was reinforced by Mr. Guterres in addressing the Stockholm + 50 conference in June 2022. He noted the health implications of this triple crisis:

“the climate emergency – “that is killing and displacing ever more people each year” – biodiversity loss – which threatens “more than three billion people” – and pollution and waste, “that is costing some nine million lives a year” (Guterres, 2022)

### **The global crisis causes large health inequities**

Sadly, it is by and large the people living in low-income countries that experience most of the health impacts of climate and other ecological changes, while having less capacity and fewer resources to address those impacts. Meanwhile, high-income countries, which historically have used most of the resources and created most of the pollution (including greenhouse gases) (Rocha et al., 2015) have used the resulting wealth to create a high standard of living, including – among other things – the capacity and resources needed to more effectively manage the impacts of the Anthropocene.

The different impacts experienced by high and low-income populations create health inequities that are found within as well as between countries. Unfortunately, those communities that already experience unequal burden of health impacts, including poorer and more disadvantaged communities and Indigenous people – are also more likely to experience the impact of our global crises. These communities are more likely to live downwind, downstream and downhill from pollution sources; and to have homes in

low-lying land prone to floods or storm surges, or uphill on vulnerable hillsides prone to landslides, or on marginal land prone to drought. Those who already experience poverty are more likely to die from climate related famines or severe weather events, or from heat effects because they lack access to cooling.

Furthermore, a report from the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (2020) notes:

“The projected decline in biodiversity will affect all people, but it will have a particularly detrimental effect on indigenous peoples and local communities, and the world’s poor and vulnerable, given their reliance on biodiversity for their wellbeing” (REF)

in addition, the 2017 Lancet Commission on Pollution and Health found not only that “diseases caused by pollution were responsible for an estimated 9 million premature deaths in 2015 - 16% of all deaths worldwide” but that children are particularly vulnerable to pollution and that pollution:

“disproportionately kills the poor and the vulnerable. Nearly 92% of pollution-related deaths occur in low-income and middle-income countries and, in countries at every income level, disease caused by pollution is most prevalent among minorities and the marginalized” (Landrigan et al., 2015),

In light of the close relationship between planetary health and inequalities in health, a key shift for the public health community must be the weaving together of the ecological and social dimensions of health: we need an eco-social approach in public health that addresses both ecological and social injustice (Parkes et al, 2020).. From the global to the local, public health will only be possible if we work together to create healthy, sustainable and equitable communities.

## A societal response: Towards Wellbeing societies

*“Let’s be clear: human activities are at the root of our descent towards chaos.*

*But that means human action can help solve it”.*

**UN Secretary General  
Antonio Guterres, 2020**

The recent WHO ‘**Geneva Charter for Well-being**’ called for the creation of ‘Well-being societies “committed to achieving equitable health now and for future generations without breaching ecological limits” (WHO, 2021b). The Charter identifies five ‘action areas’, the first three of which are particularly relevant to this discussion:

- Value, respect and nurture planet Earth and its ecosystems.
- Design an equitable economy that serves human development within planetary and local ecological boundaries.
- Develop healthy public policy for the common good

The importance of the first of these action areas is addressed in many of the reports cited already, while the third area is one that has been established as a central pillar of population health promotion since the 1986 Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion. The second action area is discussed below. In doing so, it is important to recognize that “Ecosystems sustain societies that create economies. It does not work the other way round” (WWF, 2014). The economy is just a human construct, a sub-set of the society that we can change if we need to – and we do.

## Towards a Wellbeing economy

There is a growing awareness that the current economic system – which is, after all, created by humans and thus subject to change – is “not fit for purpose in the 21st century” (Jackson, 2010) and that we need an economic system more closely aligned with population health (Hancock, 2019).

In a 2021 report to the UN General Assembly, the UN Secretary General has noted the need to change what we value and measure, noting “we need a pathway that protects people and the planet” and calling for “broad shifts in what prosperity and progress mean” (United Nations, 2021, para 37). In particular, the report notes the need to develop alternatives to GDP, which “fails to account for human well-being, planetary sustainability and non-market services and care, or to consider the distributional dimensions of economic activity” (para 38).

“Even with our planet undergoing rapid and dangerous change, economic models continue to assume endless expansion and growth and overlook the broader systems that sustain life and well-being.”

***Our Common Agenda, para 37***

Recently there has been a great deal of interest in the work of Kate Raworth, whose ‘Doughnut Economy’ model (Raworth, 2017). She proposes an economy which creates “a social foundation of well-being that no one should fall below”, while at the same time functioning within “an ecological ceiling of planetary pressure that we should not go beyond”. Other important discussions on a new economy can be found in the work of the Club of Rome’s [Transformational Economics Commission](#), which has guided their new report ‘Earth For All’ (Dixson-Decleve et al., 2022), as well as the work of the [WHO Council on the Economics of Health For All](#).

All of this comes together in the growing movement to establish a Wellbeing economy as a central pillar of a wellbeing society. A global [Wellbeing Economy Alliance](#) (WEAll) has been set up, and several governments (Finland, Iceland, New Zealand, Scotland and Wales) have come together to establish the Wellbeing Economy Governments partnership ([WEGo](#));

New Zealand led the way in 2019 by creating the world’s first Wellbeing budget (Government of New Zealand, 2019).

Here in Canada, a modest start has been made by the federal Department of Finance, which released a Budget Paper in 2021 on a Quality of Life Framework (Department of Finance Canada, 2021), but there is much more to be done. To mark World Health Day 2022, a group of 38 national and provincial health organisations – including not only the Canadian Association of Physicians for the Environment (CAPE) and the Canadian Association of Nurses for the Environment (CANE), but also the Canadian Medical Association, the Canadian Nurses Association and the Canadian Public Health Association – released an [open letter to Canada’s First Ministers](#) calling for three overarching shifts in approach:

1. Coordinate a healthy approach to society centered on well-being and interconnection within nature.
2. Transition towards a well-being focus for Canada’s economy.
3. Build a sustainable health system that helps both people and the planet flourish

A national working group has since been formed to pursue the twin and linked concepts of planetary health and a Wellbeing society. Meanwhile, in January 2022, Doctors for Planetary Health – West Coast called on the BC government to replace the GDP with a better measure such as the Genuine Progress indicator and create a Wellbeing budget. Their report also proposed the adoption of a Wellbeing of Future Generations Act and the establishment of a Commissioner for Future Generations, as Wales did in 2015 (Future Generations Commissioner for Wales, ND).

## Embracing Indigenous perspectives and knowledge(s)

*"We call on the health promotion community and the wider global community to make space for and privilege Indigenous peoples' voices and Indigenous knowledges in taking action with us to promote the health of Mother Earth and sustainable development for the benefit of all."*

### **Waiora – Indigenous Peoples' Statement for Planetary Health and Sustainable Development, IUHPE, 2019**

Indigenous people around the world have been severely impacted by centuries of colonial oppression, racism, dispossession and multiple forms of genocide including cultural. Canada is no exception to this reality. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) report articulates in detail impacts of the colonial experience.

**Indigenous peoples have the right to maintain and strengthen their distinctive spiritual relationship with their [...] lands, territories, waters and coastal seas and other resources and to uphold their responsibilities to future generations in this regard"**

**Article 25 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples**

In spite of these atrocities, the history of Indigenous people in Canada, and many other parts of the world, is also one of strength and resilience

There is a growing awareness and recognition that the knowledge, perspectives and practices of Indigenous people can provide a way forward in the face of global ecological and societal crises. "Viewing humanity as deeply connected with the environment is a central element of Indigenous knowledge systems" and Indigenous wisdom teaches that "there is an inseparable interaction and contiguity between humanity and the natural environment"

(Tuitahi et al, 2021). These relationships are the foundation of change.

The important role of Indigenous people and Indigenous thinking and practices has been recognized in several recent UN reports (see **Appendix 1**), as well as by the UN Secretary General (see **Text Box**).

In Canada, the 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report states that :

"Reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians, from an Aboriginal perspective, also requires reconciliation with the natural world. If human beings resolve problems between themselves but continue to destroy the natural world, then reconciliation remains incomplete.

This is a perspective that we as Commissioners have repeatedly heard: that reconciliation will never occur unless we are also reconciled with the earth." (p's 122 – 3)

Here in BC, Dr. Shannon Waters, a Hul'qumi'num public health physician and Medical Health Officer for the Cowichan Valley Region at Island Health, wrote a chapter titled "The Ecosystem Is Our Health System" in a national report on First Nations, Inuit, & Métis Population and Public Health (Waters, 2021). In it she noted

"As Indigenous peoples, we have responsibility to, and are in reciprocity with, both the beings around us now and those who will comprise future generations",

adding that

"The recognition, support, and advancement of Indigenous sovereignty is needed to protect the environment. After all, Indigenous sovereignty is sustainability."

In addition, IUHPE's Global Working Group on Waiora Planetary Health writes that :



“A key task for health promotion in the 21st century is to create spaces where Indigenous Peoples can be recognized as leaders, inspiring and informing ways to incorporate these values, principles and ways of knowing into health promotion practice.” (Tuitahi et al, 2021).

***‘heed their voices, reward their knowledge and respect their rights’***

*“...Indigenous knowledge, distilled over millennia of close and direct contact with nature, can help to point the way. Indigenous peoples make up less than 6 per cent of the world’s population yet are stewards of 80 per cent of the world’s biodiversity on land. Already, we know that nature managed by indigenous peoples is declining less rapidly than elsewhere. With indigenous peoples living on land that is among the most vulnerable to climate change and environmental degradation, it is time to heed their voices, reward their knowledge and respect their rights.” (8)*

**UN Secretary General  
Antonio Guterres (2020)**

## Taking local action by creating healthy and sustainable communities

One of the most enduring slogans of the environmental movement is “Think globally, act locally”, and this applies to the issues of planetary health and societal wellbeing. While some of these global challenges may seem remote, they play out locally with far-reaching impacts on the health and well-being of communities throughout BC and across Canada.

Our conference program will profile, share and amplify changes in public health practice that respond to these global and local challenges – aiming to inspire and connect between public health practices, education and research that are responding to these local to global challenges. For example:

- **Public health nurses**, may be involved in encouraging and supporting child-nature contact as a way of improving mental as well as physical wellbeing, working with

community nutritionists to promote a more healthy and sustainable low meat diet (see the new Canada Food Guide) or identifying and assisting vulnerable people during climate-related heat events or floods.

- **Environmental health officers** may be more involved in creating healthy and sustainable community plans or addressing environmental health problems linked to climate or other ecological changes; some may need to become planetary health officers.

**“Local health promotion in the 21st century needs to incorporate the concept of planetary health promotion and its application in the creation of healthy ‘One Planet’ communities and must become part of the emerging network of community organizations and individuals working to create sustainable, just and healthy communities.”**

**(Hancock, 2021)**

- **Communicable disease control staff** can expect to be spending more time dealing with infectious diseases linked to ecosystem damage, climate change and the like.
- **Medical health officers** will need to frame their work not only in terms of the social but also the ecological determinants of health, both locally and provincially, and among other things will need to advocate for public policies and other societal actions that promote planetary health at all levels.
- **Schools of public health** will have to pay more attention to teaching and research related to planetary health, the ecological determinants of health, Indigenous approaches and eco-social justice.

Across all these and many other issues, how can public health practice be invigorated to address issues of reconciliation and eco-social justice?

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**Appendix 1: Some key excerpts from recent major UN reports regarding the role and relationship of Indigenous people in making peace with the Earth**

The UN Department of Social and Economic Development Affairs acknowledges ‘the crucial role of Indigenous knowledge for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and for addressing the most pressing global problems’

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*The IPBES Global Assessment (2019)* states in the Introduction

“This is the first global-level assessment to systematically consider evidence about the contributions of indigenous and local knowledge and practices, and issues concerning Indigenous Peoples and Local Communities.”

Note their Key Messages B6, C 3 and D5:

“B6: Nature managed by indigenous peoples and local communities is under increasing pressure. Nature is generally declining less rapidly in indigenous peoples’ land than in other lands, but

is nevertheless declining, as is the knowledge of how to manage it. At least a quarter of the global land area is traditionally owned, managed, used or occupied by indigenous peoples.”

“C3: Areas of the world projected to experience significant negative effects from global changes in climate, biodiversity, ecosystem functions and nature’s contributions to people are also home to large concentrations of indigenous peoples and many of the world’s poorest communities”

“D5: Recognizing the knowledge, innovations, practices, institutions and values of indigenous peoples and local communities, and ensuring their inclusion and participation in environmental governance, often enhances their quality of life and the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of nature, which is relevant to broader society. Governance, including customary institutions and management systems and co-management regimes that involve indigenous peoples and local communities, can be an effective way to safeguard nature and its contributions to people by incorporating locally attuned management systems and indigenous and local knowledge.”

Note also this issue is very prominent in *the 2020 Human Development Report*, entitled “Human Development in the Anthropocene”. The report makes the following points:

- Indigenous and local knowledge systems and practices generate synergies between biodiversity and human wellbeing.
- Biodiversity richness is greatest under indigenous peoples’ management regimes.
- The per capita contribution by indigenous peoples preserving forest storage capacity in the Amazon is roughly equal to per capita greenhouse gas emissions by the top 1 percent of the income distribution.
- Indigenous peoples and local communities move the leverage points to build global sustainability.
- Examples of nature-based solutions by indigenous peoples and local communities.

In his very important if somewhat overlooked speech on ‘*The State of the World*’ (2 December 2020), UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres spoke very specifically to the importance of Indigenous people as protectors of nature:

“...Indigenous knowledge, distilled over millennia of close and direct contact with nature, can help to point the way. Indigenous peoples make up less than 6 per cent of the world’s population yet are stewards of 80 per cent of the world’s biodiversity on land. Already, we know that nature managed by indigenous peoples is declining less rapidly than elsewhere. With indigenous peoples living on land that is among the most vulnerable to climate change and environmental degradation, it is time to heed their voices, reward their knowledge and respect their rights.”