

Narrative Trumps Numbers: Marilyn Waring in the World  
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### **Introduction**

In a 2011 visit to the University of Victoria, Canada, Marilyn Waring noted substantial progress in the measurement of economic activity and social wellbeing since her own early work on that subject. But, in retrospect, she questioned the wisdom of her related attempts to promote monetary estimates of the value of intangible social or environmental amenities and similar services or resources routinely ignored at the time in economic calculations and reports. She expressed concern that this is the path to the individualized and commodified free market society to which Margaret Thatcher famously argued that there is no alternative (TINA).

In this paper we take Waring to be arguing TIARA: There Is A Robust Alternative. In the search for that alternative, we note some current thinking about wrong turns many years ago, two fundamental errors steering us away from the better path not taken. That path leads us away from calculation and back to conversation, where narrative must trump numbers, deliberation and reason must set calculation in context, value must displace price, and there is no substitute for the stories of the folks in place. We conclude with brief speculation that perhaps the emergence of the social web makes pursuit of this goal possible in ways that previously could not have been considered.

### **Progress in Measuring and Reporting Social Performance**

The original emphasis on the pursuit of human wellbeing as the purpose of economics slipped by the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century into a concern with growth in aggregate indicators of economic activity. By the end of the century, it seemed that an everlasting expansion of the monetary value of paper claims had become the overwhelming obsession for many people and in much public policy. Through the last quarter-century, however, growing misgivings led also to a wide range of critiques of this economic fundamentalism as represented by the uses to which the ubiquitous UN System of National Accounts (SNA) was being put in guiding public policy.

Proposals for more comprehensive indices of economic wellbeing, appeal to broader measures of human development taking into account human and social capital, creation of 'genuine progress indicators' taking into account natural capital, and similar initiatives, all gained increasing support among academics and civil society organizations. (The risks inherent in using words like 'capital' in this context have been widely discussed, and are noted later in this paper. Here the intention is simply to capture in shorthand language the notion of diverse capacities or systems, tangible or intangible, that can be built up or run down and that can yield flows of services or benefits of value to humans or other species.) The critiques of the SNA became well-known, and the perverse consequences of its misinterpretation as offering social indicators much better understood.

Waring was a leader in this work, with her 1988 book *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics* bringing to public attention deep concerns that previously had been confined to arcane technical discussion.

Twenty years on, we have powerful support for these ideas. Beginning in 2008, renowned economists Joseph Stiglitz and Amartya Sen collaborated with Jean Paul Fitoussi, another leading development economist, on the Sarkozy Commission, established by Nicholas Sarkozy, then President of France. In 2009, the Commission released its report, *On the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress*. The Report placed emphasis on indicators offering a better understanding of wellbeing and inequalities, with reduced emphasis on aggregate data masking the realities of people's situations. In 2010 it was translated into a book for a general audience, under the illuminating title, *Mis-measuring Our Lives*.

Much current work attempts to pursue this approach of 'improving' the traditional GDP measure. Examples include the 2011 "Beyond GDP" Initiative that grew out of a 2007 high level conference involving the European Commission, European Parliament, Club of Rome, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and World Wildlife Fund (WWF). This initiative is directed toward "developing indicators that are as clear and appealing as GDP, but more inclusive of environmental and social aspects of progress" (About Beyond GDP, para 1). Its website serves as a clearinghouse for work on many illustrative indicators.

Considerations of subjective well-being (happiness) entered public discourse in the early 1970's. In 1972, the King of Bhutan, upon taking the throne, declared his objective was to increase GNH, "gross national happiness," not GDP (Dickinson, para. 6). The first *World Happiness Report*, prepared for an April 2012 UN Conference (proposed by Bhutan), has now been released by the Earth Institute.

The literature critical of any of these aggregate measures is growing rapidly. The problems of course lie not in failures of the metrics in the purposes for which they were constructed, but rather in the goal displacement effects that arise from the decision ('in the absence of anything better') to use those metrics for purposes for which they were never designed or intended. Any translation of all this thinking into effective political support for the use of different metrics and subsequently the pursuit of different policies seems still to be lacking, however.

### **Progress in imputation of monetary values: on to Free Market Environmentalism**

One response to challenges to aggregate metrics has been to forego the convenience of a single aggregate indicator of progress or wellbeing and confront a quiver of different indicators coming closer to representing the significance of diverse services or resources. We all recognize the difficulty of representing incommensurable aspects of human welfare or ecological integrity. Yet, for many decisions in our existing market-based world, we have to weigh one against the other. We need to make things somehow commensurate in order to make inescapable tradeoffs in the allocation of scarce resources.

The argument is summarized, for example, in Nancy Olewiler's 2012 report "Smart Environmental Policy with Full-Cost Pricing", which recommends full-cost pricing as an important approach to ensuring that ecosystem goods and services, and other intangible amenities, not be valued implicitly at zero and ignored altogether in the calculus of trading and resource allocation. Though the goal is obviously admirable, technically this task is very hard indeed, and inevitably quite subjective. Nevertheless, it is argued, 'some number is better than no number', though that claim remains hotly disputed.

There is a closely-related question to be considered, namely the use of such market-like prices and economic instruments as information essential for permitting coordinated decentralized decisions on access to or allocation of resources, including those yielding ecosystem services, and ultimately determining claims of ownership or title to the returns from such assets or control over their disposition.

One entrenched approach to this problem of social organization is to assign property rights over all things- -especially natural capital and corresponding ecological services- - and thus create otherwise missing markets that will generate and be guided by otherwise absent price signals. Background available at the new Property and Environment Research Centre (PERC) website, among many others, illustrates the arguments of those dedicated to this cause of free market environmentalism (FME).

Thus, proceeding down this path, we might claim progress toward better aggregate metrics, progress toward sound imputation of economic values to social and environmental flows, and rapid progress in clarifying and extending private property rights. So we could argue for a triumph of Free Market Environmentalism in fully integrating social and environmental concerns into economic decisions.

But then we encounter some serious second thoughts. The depth and extent of the protracted (unresolvable?) debate calling this approach into question is well summarized in an excellent recent review, "Ecosystem services: Tensions, impurities, and points of engagement within neoliberalism" by Jessica Dempsey and Morgan M. Robertson.

### **The challenge: A failure of framing**

With the current global financial crisis it becomes increasingly obvious that some different societal mechanisms for allocation of access to services of global ecosystem resources are essential. Many would argue that speculative trade in paper title setting out claims of ownership to privatized portions of global ecosystems that form part of a common heritage of humankind, is not just unethical, but risks accelerating economic and social instability.

In the absence of such trade, however, we need to bring in something like the concept of strong sustainability as an alternative to tradeoffs based on monetary valuation. Proponents of this concept argue that some forms of natural capital or ecosystem

services cannot be replaced. The economist's notion that one form of capital can be substituted for another may not apply to some features of ecosystems or ecosystem services on which we all depend. No amount of investment in physical or human capital, it is argued, can make up for loss of the ozone layer or compromise of the water cycle. In this case, there is no need to estimate any monetary values or equivalents: if the heirlooms are not to be traded, there is no need to ask their price. A case for this strong sustainability approach is set out in the New Zealand report, "Strong Sustainability for New Zealand: Principles and Scenarios."

Waring in her talk raised the more fundamental concern, "the rampant growth in the colonizing power of economics, a sort of contagious illusion that everything can be reduced to a price" (Waring, *Is there some way* 3). If the value of social or ecological services or networks is successfully captured in monetary terms, reflecting utilitarian exchange value, will they then be seen only as commodities, failing to reflect values associated with the interests of future generations, other species, even those in other places or other classes? She questioned whether her own earlier strategy of promoting work on imputation of monetary values to such ecosystems services was not seriously misguided, the beginning of a slippery slope to commodification of unpriced ecological and cultural resources and ultimately to privatization of what should be recognized as a common heritage of humankind. In the context of existing distributions of income, wealth, political power and social influence, should attaching imputed (and disputed) market values to such resources as pure water or marine ecosystems not be seen as simply unethical?

With the growing recognition of the profoundly uncertain and possibly chaotic character of the complex social-ecological systems of which humanity is a part, we need to turn this FME vision inside out: rather than integrating environmental concerns within economic decisions, we need to set our view of economic mechanisms and institutions as social contrivances within their social context, and that in turn within the biosphere that sustains us all. Dobell's 1995 paper, "Environmental Degradation and the Religion of the Market" provides an early sketch of this idea.

Evidently we can and should use economic systems for social purposes. Markets and economic instruments offer the most effective signalling device and decentralization machinery imaginable- -but without guidance they do not automatically pursue goals such as equality, social justice and community resilience that cannot be captured within the calculations of FME. We must be sure we have the overarching social controls and public regulation in place. Dobell develops this argument further in a 1996 chapter, "The Dance of the Deficit: Economic Management for Social Purpose."

The first step toward identifying an alternative approach might be to suggest that in the construction and evolution of economic institutions, humanity has made two fundamental errors.

One is the creation of the corporate person, a legal fiction now endowed with almost all the fundamental rights of the person, but without moral responsibility (indeed with an

over-riding fiduciary responsibility to an exclusive group of owners) and with only limited legal liability, in a unique position to take advantage of the second error.

The second error is the creation and now almost universal spread of a notion of property rights that defends the enclosure and privatization of the Earth itself- -the resources and ecosystems that are the common heritage of humankind.

From this second error emerges the problem that paper claims to natural capital become the object of chaotic speculative trading that excludes the initial owners and fails to recognize the realities of the ecological systems within which all human activity is embedded. From the first comes the problem that the corporate persons that have become the major players, exercising overwhelming financial and political (and military) power, cannot effectively participate as moral persons in any alternative discourse around the community's management of rights of access to the adjacent resources and ecosystems within which they live.

### **Maybe narrative can trump numbers?**

The two 'errors' just identified are rather fundamental- -is there any hope they can be undone, that we can accomplish the figure-ground reversal that recognizes our economic institutions not as defining and dictating our world, but simply as social constructions within the overarching biosphere that gives us life? Given the degree to which present practices are entrenched in current institutional structures, and defended to the extreme by current power, is there any reason to believe that there could be any alternative? There is no space here to do more than note a few arguments that may suggest hope. It is not impossible to imagine action to regain some of the human rights and agency lost in the wake of the two errors mentioned. We do see growing reaction against privatization and enclosure of the common land, and increasing resistance to corporate action that compromises ecological integrity.

Any alternative to the FME approach must be careful about language. We can go back to the argument for sustainability, but cast more strongly now in terms of stories rather than calculations. In those constructions, we have to be aware that language can play a forceful role in excluding other perspectives:

*"If you are not talking their language, if you are not talking their jargon, you are not part of the argument. There must be something wrong with you. You are not sensible or intelligent about your approach to this thing. So, the power of economics mirrors, to a certain extent, the political power rampant anywhere else. You operate with language as well as operating with mathematics."*  
(Waring, *Who's Counting?* 79:20)

But, *"Language is a tool available to all of us."* (Waring, *Who's Counting?* 86:22)

And in contesting the overarching hegemony of economic fundamentalism, Canada's activist scholar Ursula Franklin reminds us in, *The Ursula Franklin Reader*, that people under occupation have refused to speak the language of the occupier. She advises that we too should avoid "the language of the market," which speaks of "service providers"

and "clients," of "stakeholders" and of "the bottom line" and "customers" of the government rather than "citizens". Franklin notes that for us these individuals are our teachers and students, our friends, families and communities, not targets for commerce (*Reader* 125). When we allow the community conversation around forests and streams to be couched solely in terms of timber, fibre and return on investment, we have already lost the struggle.

We take from Waring the counsel that when it comes to the things that matter, narrative trumps numbers, cooperation outperforms competition, and the search for context is crucial. Margaret Visser, in her 2002 Massey Lectures, *Beyond Fate*, similarly urges attention to language and to context. (Ian McGilchrist's massive 2009 work, *The Master and his Emissary*, grounds that search for context in a fascinating link to fundamental brain function.)

With those reminders about language and context, we can look to some fragments that suggest the possibility of a robust alternative, despite the overwhelming power arrayed against any such effort. Possibilities are being clarified in many recent writings and developments contesting the primacy of rights of corporations and advancing the rights of current and future generations by promoting the inherent rights of Nature (as against corporate rights to Nature). Consider a few illustrative examples.

With effective nested institutions of the sort urged by Elinor Ostrom in her *Nobel Prize Lecture*, social consensus might be built on the pursuit of strong sustainability and on community norms or formal zoning governing access to those ecological resources and ecosystems. The power to allocate access to harvesting or withdrawal rights among competing purposes would rest with the community. Water rights, air rights, rights of way would all revert to that public owner when the rights of access or use are surrendered by those who currently hold them. Socially regulated creation of community quota for purposes of sustainable harvesting of renewable resources could be one component.

The extensive research program of Mathias Risse provides a strong philosophical rationale for such an approach (see, for example, "Original Ownership of the Earth: A Contemporary Approach"). That research program, and earlier reasoning of Henry George, who advocated ownership of land as common property with a public claim to the surplus arising from its rising scarcity value (George, *Progress* VI.II.3), provide a foundation for more comprehensive social regulation to constrain privatization of the common heritage of humankind.

In this spirit, we can also see the possibilities for a public trust doctrine that imposes on legislatures an obligation to stand against the claims of corporations when the interests of the public in ecological integrity seem threatened. One approach to such a public trust doctrine is outlined by Jackson, Brandes and Christensen in the April 2012 issue of the *Journal of Environmental Law and Practice*.

The issue of civil and political rights of corporations more generally is illustrated by the Program on Corporations, Law and Democracy (POCLAD) in the United States. There seems to be growing attention paid to the perverse consequences of entrenched

traditions of corporate rights flowing almost by accident from judicial observations from long ago; one important suggestion flowing from the POCLAD work is the need to reclaim the right to issue (or revoke) corporate charters to ensure that corporations are formed and function to serve some public interest.

With increasing support for the idea that corporations need a ‘social license to operate’ comes also the possibility that such a social license entails reciprocal obligations, and will be offered only with a contractual commitment to give up privileges such as corporate privacy rights in order to ensure full disclosure of information relevant to the community—for example, information on the chemical content of fluids used in ‘fracking’ processes to produce natural gas.

The recent book by Anna Grear, *Redirecting Human Rights: Facing the Challenges of Corporate Legal Humanity*, addresses the crucial distinction between living human beings and disembodied legal subjects (corporations), and the need to privilege the former in humans rights discourse.

Pursuing a different path, a number of fragments suggest increasing attention to what might be considered the rights of Nature (as distinct from private rights to Nature). Examples include the April 2010 Cochabamba Universal Declaration of the Rights of Mother Earth, recognized (in somewhat lukewarm fashion) in paragraph 39 of the document, *The future we want*, emerging from the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20).

Anna Grear’s co-edited volume, *Should Trees Have Standing: 40 Years On*, offers an academic update on the heels of Christopher Stone’s own influential book, *Should Trees Have Standing?: Law, Morality and the Environment*. Action in line with the argument there can perhaps be seen in New Zealand, where a framework agreement signed in August 2012 between the Crown and the Whanganui River iwi (the local Māori people), provides that the river will be recognized as a person when it comes to the law, with guardians appointed to speak for it (Shuttleworth). Related developments in constitutional law or local action are described by Linda Sheehan at the website of the Earth Law Institute ([www.earthlaw.org](http://www.earthlaw.org)).

Of course, the idea of moving into the hands of the lawyers to drive a fundamentally new legal structure forward, in order to escape the clutches of the economist, may be seen as rather ambitious, if not foolish. Lee Godden, in an extensive review of the book *The Principle of Sustainability: Transforming Law and Governance*, by Klaus Bosselmann, captures this concern: “While the transcendental function of law should not be ignored, it is a large contention to construe sustainability as the foundation for reconstituting the liberal legal paradigms that currently govern a growth-oriented political economy and nation-state autonomy.” (Godden 808). Perhaps there is hope to enlist both tribes of experts, however, along with other technical expertise in a broader initiative in which the web-enabled world supports co-creation and co-application of formal knowledge together with appeal to the “wisdom of crowds” in hybrid deliberative spaces.

Thus we might deploy economic instruments and exploit economic institutions within a social frame that sees common resources used to serve social purposes, within an ethical frame that reflects the rights of those in other places and other times. We can have social regulation driven by ethical commitments, and still deploy all the magic of market mechanisms for purposes of efficient decentralization of resource allocation decisions and as a vehicle for effective realization of personal as well as societal goals. But this middle way hinges crucially on our ability to take back democratic control of political institutions, and to move away from a setting in which financial power dictates the composition and conclusions of those institutions.

So we can argue that there is indeed a robust alternative. It lies with the world of cooperative action and civil society institutionally, within a conceptual frame recognizing ecological integrity as the pre-requisite to sustainability. The sustained reflections of James Tully (see, for a recent example, *A Dilemma of Democratic Citizenship*,) outline more fully a possible path and perhaps reasons for hope. And perhaps, as just noted, one can see promise of tapping into the wisdom of crowds for governance reform through web-enabled platforms supporting deliberative democracy.

### **Conclusion: TIARA**

We began with the argument that the global information apparatus built on the UN System of National Accounts represents a technical triumph, but is widely misunderstood and grossly mis-used as a measure of social performance or as a foundation for collective decisions. It is crucial that we see life more expansively, with attention to the people, communities and biosphere around us.

In the absence of actual market transactions signalling the value of these other features of life, we could imagine transactions in them, and impute corresponding prices as monetary values to ensure that these fundamental aspects of real life are not completely ignored in social reporting and decisions. But doing so creates two risks: first, using those imputed values leads to social decisions completely dominated by divisions of dollars; and, second, but worse, the argument becomes one for free market environmentalism urging the creation of private property rights to anything of value, privatizing what has been held in common (and should be held in trust), in order to create formal markets from which will flow observed, not imputed, prices on the basis of which all can be traded. Margaret Thatcher argued TINA: there is no alternative.

We have argued TIARA: There Is A Robust Alternative. But it entails that we change the discourse altogether, looking to narrative more than numbers, watching our language carefully, restoring the relevance and persuasive power of the visual, the personal, the community stories, in shaping the perceptions that go into community decisions around access to and use of community resources, and especially into the integrity of community norms, social capital and surrounding ecosystems on which all depends.

Such a transformation in narrative and discourse demands that we move away from a society centered on paper claims to private ownership of common resources. We must come to see it as a fundamental mistake to transfer such ownership claims to a legal fiction, the corporation that has become the overwhelmingly powerful political and social

actor. These artificial persons offer no more moral responsibility than the decontextualized machines and algorithms to which they (we) increasingly delegate responsibility for filtering content from chaos and signal from noise in the torrents of text and firehoses of data that increasingly intrude on all attempts to build a shared and reasoned foundation for social decisions. We have to reject the temptation to duck all responsibility by throwing it all back on the impersonal and inexorable 'wisdom of the market', and instead must recognize the wisdom flowing from the lived experience of the more inclusive crowd as more crucial. We need not- -must not- -subordinate our judgement, agency and moral compass to allegedly irresistible market forces.

Knowing we are facing an inescapable sustainability imperative, riding what Ronald Wright, in the closing pages from his 2004 Massey Lectures, *An Illustrated Short History of Progress*, characterized as a suicide machine that must change direction, we have a choice.

We can follow an economic route to a globally consistent system relying on full cost pricing, free market environmentalism and rational calculation to generate a full system of impersonal price signals on which decentralized decisions reflecting immediate self-interest can responsibly be based.

Or we can change the current discourse and move toward reliance on contextualization, visualization and narrative within inclusive nested institutions to provide a foundation for deliberation and judgement leading to responsible decisions at local scale based on norms of cooperation and continuity, recognizing inherent rights of Nature along with fundamental human rights, including rights to a healthy environment.

This paper stems from challenges posed by Marilyn Waring. It seems unlikely that her work could have highlighted this search for context as it has, had she been simply a gifted undergraduate going on to some demanding scholarly discipline. Her grounding in the soil, on the farm with the goats, her embedding within neighbouring traditions (of teaching as well as governance), and experience of place, along with her extended field trip into formal parliamentary government, all had to go into the making of a teacher able to look with fresh eyes at entrenched conventional institutions. In doing so, she challenges us all to challenge them in order to do better ourselves.

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