

Shiny happy people? The madness of the Happy Planet Index [1]

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The New Economics Foundation's Happy Planet Index has been inspiring bemusement and mirth since it first appeared in 2006. The [third installment, released last week](#) ^[3], continues to defy parody with its glorification of lawless, poverty-stricken countries in the name of environmental sustainability.

The index is made up of three elements—self-reported well-being, life expectancy and size of ecological footprint—but is so heavily weighted towards the latter that economic basket-cases, police states and peasant societies score highly at the expense of places in which you would actually want to live. Consequently, Luxembourg, where life expectancy is 80 years and the well-being score is 7.1, finds itself 30 places behind Rwanda, where life expectancy is 55.4 years and well-being is scored at 4.0.

If the good people of Luxembourg (ranked 138th) have not already bought a one-way ticket to more desirable destinations such as Malawi (72nd), Haiti (78th) or Afghanistan (109th), they can console themselves that they are still one place ahead of Sierra Leone (139th), although that could all change if the Sierra Leoneans buy a wind turbine.

The Happy Planet Index has been [criticised in the past](#) ^[4] for bearing no relation to other happiness surveys and for [implying that Burma is a nicer place to live than Sweden](#) ^[5]. This year, the Swedes leap-frogged the Burmese to climb to 52nd place, but still trail such mighty nations as Belize, Honduras and the reigning champion Costa Rica.

NEF has responded to critics by saying that their index is not supposed to be used as a measure of happiness per se, but it was not their critics who called it the 'Happy Planet Index', nor was it their critics who called it a 'new measure of progress'. If, as the NEF claim, the index gives us 'a clear compass to help us all move in the right direction', one must infer that there is something about such places as Vietnam (2nd) and El Salvador (5th) that the West should emulate.

It is difficult to take an index seriously when it places Iraq (36th) and Albania (18th) ahead of Iceland (88th) and Australia (76th). It is not just that the list contains some strange anomalies, rather that it defies common sense from start to finish. It is not even consistent with NEF dogma which dismisses GDP and worships equality.

Economic prosperity is predictably excluded from the index, thus allowing an assortment of developing countries to rise to the top, but these countries are not just poor, they also distribute their limited wealth in a most uneven fashion. With the exception of the nominally communist Vietnam, the top ten is made up of

countries which are 'less equal' than even the USA. Whereas America's Gini coefficient is 40.8, income inequality in those nine countries ranges from 43.5 (Venezuela) to 58.5 (Colombia).

One of the bon mots of Richard Wilkinson, co-author of *The Spirit Level*, is 'if you want to live the American dream, move to Denmark'. The Happy Planet Index supports that assertion only insofar as these two countries are close together on the list. The egalitarian Danes rank 110th, while the Great Satan sits at 105th. Neither are within touching distance of Bangladesh (11th).

Just as Wilkinson has so far resisted the temptation to emigrate to the Scandinavian nations he so reveres, it is doubtful that the NEF wonks who consider Colombia and Costa Rica to be models of 'sustainable well-being' will be moving to either. It is much easier to romanticise subsistence living in Nicaragua (ranked 8th) from the comfort of the United Kingdom (ranked 41st), just as it is easier to dismiss the importance of per capita GDP from a semi-detached house in Belgium (\$33,357 - ranked 107th) than from a hut in Vietnam (\$2,953 - ranked 2nd).

The Happy Planet Index does, however, serve a valuable purpose in that it tests the NEF's priorities in the real world. Having eschewed economic growth in favour of a questionable definition of environmental sustainability, it is not surprising that the 'successful' countries turn out to be the kind of places that would deter the most intrepid backpacker. Having arrived at these findings, most researchers would question the fundamental assumptions that underpin their methodology.

The NEF, however, not only doggedly insist that these failed states are the new Jerusalem, but seriously suggest that we become more like them. Those who fear that far-left environmentalists use climate change as an excuse to send us back to the dark ages will find much to encourage their beliefs here.

The real lesson to be learnt from the Happy Planet project is that small ecological footprints are incompatible with economic prosperity, for the time being at least. The report itself notes that only four of the top 40 countries have a per capita GDP that exceeds \$15,000, but it does not mention the crucial and closely related fact that those four countries are also the only ones in the top 40 to have a large ecological footprint and are the only ones to have life expectancies that exceed 80 years.

There are clearly trade-offs to be made and since the world and his wife differ from the staff of the NEF by valuing income, political stability and houses made of bricks, the minutemen of the USA will be busy watching out for would-be immigrants from nations ranked 100 places below them for the foreseeable future.

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[3] <http://www.neweconomics.org/blog/2012/06/14/measuring-what-matters-the-happy-planet-index-2012>

[4] <http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php?/site/printable/1414/>

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