

How shorter workweeks could save Earth

By Tim Smedley. BBC.com, 7th August 2019.

If everyone in the world consumed the same levels of fuel, food, clothes and building materials as Europeans, we **would require 2.8 planet Earths**. If everyone led a US lifestyle, it would require five planet Earths. Somewhere in between commuting, making money and spending money, we are undeniably living unsustainably.

And just last month, 29 July became **the earliest 'Earth Overshoot Day'** on record: the day on which humanity's demand for ecological resources exceeds what Earth can regenerate in a year, according to **Global Footprint Network**, an international research organisation. 1972 was the last time we made it **into December**.

But there's a novel idea that could turn this around: we work less, thus slowing down the global economy and curbing our seemingly endless appetite to consume more stuff. Is that feasible – and would it really save the world?

Changing our work habits on a global scale is a monumental task. The average American works 44 hours a week and receives just 10 days of holiday. In China, **the 72-hour, 6-day week is common**. Japan works such long hours there's even a word for "death by overwork": *karōshi*.

However, **one analysis from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst** argues "working less is good for the environment": that if we spent 10% less time working, our carbon footprint would be reduced by 14.6%, largely due to less commuting or consuming high-carbon convenience foods on our breaks. A full day off a week would therefore reduce our carbon footprint by almost 30%.

We like to blame climate change on industry and big business. But the way we live, work and consume is actually the primary source of emissions. A multi-national study by the Norwegian University of Science and Technology of the **environmental impact of consumers** found that the stuff we buy is responsible for more than 60% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, and up to 80% of global water use.

And yet, growing that consumption still further is what economies are built upon. According to University of Surrey professor Tim Jackson's book ***Prosperity Without Growth***, the global economy has expanded on average by 3.65% each year since 1950. In a 'business as usual' world, that would lead to a global economy 200 times bigger than 1950 levels by 2100, or 326 times bigger if developing countries continue to develop. "The non-growing economy is anathema to an economist," writes Jackson. "But the idea of a continually growing economy is anathema to an ecologist. No subsystem of a finite system can grow indefinitely."

Many argue that GDP (Gross Domestic Product) is no longer an adequate measure of economic performance, and that forever trying to grow it has a bad effect on the planet. As Oxford economist Kate Raworth points out, GDP completely ignores the "unpaid care economy", or ecological services such as clean air and clean water. Even US politician Robert F. Kennedy once said in the 1960s, "GDP measures everything except that which makes life worthwhile."

Alternative measures to GDP do exist however, such the UN's **Inequality Adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI)**, which includes life expectancy, inequality and education alongside income. Whereas Norway, the US and Germany come 10th, 11th and 16th in the World Bank's GDP table, in the IHDI they come 2nd, 24th and 7th, respectively.

If we all worked a four-day week, there's good reason to assume that life expectancy, inequality and education scores could all go up. New **research by Henley Business School** revealed that firms that adopted a four-day working week found that over three quarters of staff (78%) were happier, less stressed (70%) and took fewer days off ill (62%).