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SYNOPSIS

A decade after its conception, Planetary Health remains a vital framework linking human and planetary well-being. It challenges a dangerous historical pattern where progress was accompanied by wanton environmental destruction, from the 19th-century bison slaughter to increased production of palm oil and modern deep-sea mining. To secure a resilient future, a shift towards integrated and systemic governance is required.

COMMENTARY

The tenth anniversary of the *Rockefeller Foundation-Lancet Commission on Planetary Health* arrives at a critical moment. The concept of Planetary Health – an interdisciplinary field and social movement that recognises the deep connection between the health of human civilisation and the health of Earth's natural systems, on which human health depends – is more relevant than ever.

The Planetary Health framework is essential for an understanding of why siloed, short-sighted approaches to solving global problems have consistently failed. When environmental protection and economic development are viewed as separate goals, one is often sacrificed for the other, creating new crises in the process. History provides painful lessons on this recurring failure.

A Recurring Pattern of Destruction

In the 19th century, the American bison was driven from a population numbering tens of millions to near extinction. This was a direct result of a policy that equated "progress" with clearing the North American plains for settlement and industry. The rapid and widespread slaughter of the bison, a keystone species to the region, was

systematically organised and executed. Hunted for its hide and bones, the bison's value was reduced to mere industrial inputs.

This historical event was a classic example of a society failing to see the systemic value of a natural resource. The focus was on immediate economic gain, with no regard for the long-term ecological and social devastation that would follow.

A similar logic has driven the rapid expansion of industrial-scale palm oil plantations across Southeast Asia. Fuelled by global consumer demand for an inexpensive and versatile commodity used in countless products, vast tracts of the world's oldest rainforests have been cleared for oil palm cultivation. This deforestation is often framed as an engine of economic development and poverty alleviation for the region.

Today, there are echoes of this same logic of "short-term gains over long-term destruction" in the debate over deep-sea mining. Proponents argue that the seabed must be mined for minerals essential for the green energy transition. This narrative, like those before it, frames the issue as a simple choice between one environmental harm and another.

This framing, however, presents a challenging dilemma that may overlook more effective solutions. A Planetary Health perspective forces a more comprehensive and systemic consideration: Why are solutions to one crisis being pursued by creating another? The framework challenges an approach based on simple trade-offs, demanding instead an analysis of the root causes of unsustainable consumption.

The Price of Progress

The consequences of these narrowly defined decisions are never distributed equally. The near disappearance of the bison was a direct assault on the indigenous peoples of the North American continent, destroying their economies and health. Likewise, deforestation for palm oil has displaced local and indigenous communities, while the resulting transboundary haze from land-clearing fires has created numerous public health crises across Southeast Asia.

Similarly, the push for deep-sea mining places a heavy burden on climate-vulnerable Pacific Island nations. They face intense pressure to risk their primary natural and cultural heritage – the ocean – to supply minerals for a transition driven by and for developed nations.

Each of these examples cited has created a clear sacrifice by an identifiable group of people and their original way of life. To the affected communities, they paid the heaviest price of progress. This highlights the issues of equity and justice that Planetary Health seeks to address. Actual progress, such as a global green energy transition, cannot be built on harming those who are least responsible for the crises being faced.

Furthermore, these actions are taken with a poor understanding of the long-term risks. The 19th-century bison hunters had no idea of the ecological tipping point they were crossing. Today, scientists warn that there is a similarly poor understanding of the deep sea's role in regulating the planet's climate. A lack of comprehensive knowledge

of the impacts of large-scale machinery on the seabed could lead to irreversible ecological damage. Proceeding with deep-sea mining before this science is properly understood is a direct violation of the precautionary principle.

A Crisis of Governance

These recurring situations highlight the inherent challenges in global governance. The bison were destroyed in an era of a near-total governance vacuum. Today, institutions intended to govern the impact of ecologically extractive or damaging activities exist, but their effectiveness is questionable.

The International Seabed Authority (ISA), responsible for managing the deep seabed, faces a fundamental conflict of interest, tasked with both facilitating mineral exploitation and protecting the environment. Similarly, industry-led bodies like the Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil (RSPO) are often criticised for weak standards, conflicts of interest, and a failure to halt deforestation effectively.

These structural flaws raise critical questions about whether current global governance frameworks are truly fit for protecting the planet's shared resources for future generations.

Systemic Policy Through Interconnected Planetary Health Frameworks

To break this historical cycle, a shift from siloed problem-solving to integrated, systemic action is necessary. A Planetary Health framework points towards three key areas for policy focus:

Adopt Integrated Impact Assessments

Governments and international bodies must move beyond narrow Environmental Impact Assessments. New projects should be evaluated with a Planetary Health lens, assessing their total, comprehensive, and interconnected impact on human health, social equity, biodiversity, and ecosystem stability before they are approved. This is required to provide an accurate assessment of the socioecological impacts that are not diminished in the face of short-term economic gains.

Ensure Justice and Equity in Resource Governance

Global governance frameworks must be reformed to prioritise the rights of the most vulnerable. This requires ensuring that local and Indigenous communities have a meaningful and empowered voice in decisions that affect their heritage, environments and livelihoods. The knowledge and experiences of indigenous communities are crucial to a deeper and more systemic understanding of the impacts of extractive activities. Principles such as "Free, Prior, and Informed Consent" must be made a binding requirement, not an optional guideline.

Champion Systemic Solutions and the Circular Economy

The long-term, effective, and sustainable solution to fossil fuel energy dependence is not to find new frontiers for extraction. Instead, it requires policies to fundamentally

reduce wasteful production and the primary demand for virgin resources, even when expanding renewable energy infrastructure. Governments must accelerate investment and create strong policy incentives for the circular economy, fostering innovation in recycling, promoting reuse and repair, and designing systems that eliminate excess extraction of raw materials.

Conclusion

The extermination of the bison and the ongoing challenges of palm oil production serve as stark reminders of the consequences of failure. The ultimate test of the Planetary Health concept over the next decade will be its ability to ensure that humanity learns from its past and does not repeat its destructive mistakes on a planetary scale.

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