

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 usrĒ

Waring was a leader in this work, with her 1988 book *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics* bringing to public attention deep

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



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- -

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

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









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