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Baseball and the world sustainability series

Roy Ostling, Special to Oceanside Star
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The World Series pitting the Tampa Bay Rays and the Philadelphia Phillies is now underway. Millions of baseball fans will tune into what's dubbed the annual 'Fall Classic.' But I wonder how many of them will realize how closely the playing field and rules of America's National Game mirrors how most people see our economy?

Baseball differs from other ball sports in two significant ways. Whereas most sports are played within a rectangular space with defined limits or boundaries, a baseball field is only bounded by two foul lines that extend from home plate and theoretically stretch to infinity. Why, you can knock the ball right out of the park! As well, with two equally matched teams, a baseball game could conceivably last forever.

What does this have to do with the prevailing view of our economy and the prospects of a sustainable future? First, most economists and our political leaders speak and act as if our economy has no boundaries and can grow continuously on a field where nature's limited resources and the laws of physics don't apply. Secondly, in this game there's the dangerous assumption that both sides -- nature and the economy -- are equally matched and we can keep playing this way, ignoring the fact that a healthy environment is the foundation of our economy.

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Another striking parallel between baseball and our economy is numbers and statistics. As sports historian Allen Guttmann observed: "baseball was marked from the start by quantification and the proliferation of records that quantification makes possible." Baseball jargon is filled with performance rating acronyms such as ERA (earned run average), RBI (runs batted in) and SBA (stolen base average).

Likewise our economic performance is tracked by a mind-numbing range of statistics: LEI (leading economic indicators), GDP (gross domestic product) and CPI (consumer price index). What these commonly reported statistics don't tell us, however, is what's really happening on the actual economic playing field -- the productive ecosystems that feed the all the players.

At this point in the World Sustainability Series we're in the bottom of the ninth, and most our leading players, the economists and politicians, are looking for a quick fix. We're losing because our financial mess is putting our national and global economies into a recession. The only way to get back in the game, they think, is to put our economy on steroids by injecting an unhealthy dose of growth-inducing debt.

Meanwhile, we're ignoring the score in our real home ballpark, the health of our environment. We started on this losing streak back in 1985, when we began stealing from the Earth's natural capital while ignoring ecological carrying capacity. Now in just nine months we take more than our planet can generate annually in terms of forests, clean water, fisheries, productive soil and other limited resources. We're eating away at the capital instead of living off the interest, effectively stealing what the other side can no longer afford to give.

This year could mark the first time a team with a losing record the previous year, the Tampa Bay Rays, goes on to win a World Series. As a steadfast fan for the underdog in the World Sustainability Series, I'm pulling to get the environment and the economy back on a level playing field. Remember, nature always bats last. The only way we can win is to switch to a non-competitive game or a steady state economy and play within the limits of the natural order.

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