Behind the PR: Apple's Real Impact on Our Environment

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Apple claims to do more than any company on the planet to protect and steward natural resources and the environment. In recent years the company has shifted many of its U.S. facilities to sustainable and renewable energy sources; progressively downsized the amount of materials in its products; and reduced the lifecycle carbon footprint of its devices by designing more energy-efficient operating systems and power supplies. However, when one examines the carbon footprint of production of Apple products, one sees a very different story with troubling implications. As Apple's popularity, sales, and profits have grown to astounding heights, so too has the size of its production footprint. My preliminary calculations show that Apple's manufacturing carbon footprint has increased by 4,534 percent since 2008. In other words, Apple's manufacturing carbon footprint today is more than 46 times greater than it was when the iPhone was released. This reveals that while Apple's uses its marketing and public relations platforms to position itself as a leader in conservation and sustainability, in fact its manufacturing practices demonstrate a seeming total disregard for the warnings of climate scientists on the need to significantly cut back manufacturing-related emissions.

In my presentation I will share a close accounting of the data and methods used to arrive at these figures, as well as other preliminary data that show how much of Apple's production footprint is attributed to iPods, iPhones, and iPads. To contextualize these data I will compare them to industry trends. I will also share the status of my preliminary investigation into Apple's land and water footprint related to production—issues that receive far too little attention in both journalistic and academic realms. Using all of this information I will suggest what a holistic product emissions and resource footprint should include, with special focus on the lifetime carbon footprint of products given data usage.