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State of the World 2013: Is sustainability still possible?

by Erik Assadourian & Tom Prugh (Project Directors) and edited by Linda Starke, Washington, DC, Worldwatch Institute and Island Press, 2013, 464 pp, US\$22.00 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-61091-449-9

The book's title poses a thorny question. It then pokes and prods, and responds to it in 34 thoughtful chapters (by 54 contributors/co-authors) to get to the heart of the tremendous environmental and social challenges we now face.

The Worldwatch Institute has published *State of the World* annually since 1983. Each volume has a certain focus. Sometimes there is a call for caution (2009 - 'Into a Warming World'); other times a celebration of progress (2011 - 'Innovations that Nourish the Planet').

The current volume includes perhaps the most troubling information and is arguably the most important one to date. Chapter 1 ('Beyond Sustainababble') outlines the scope and purpose of the sections that follow.

'The Sustainability Metric', with nine chapters, explores what a rigorous definition of sustainability entails in order to make it a concept that is both measurable and meaningful. For a start, the chapter 'Respecting Planetary Boundaries and Reconnecting to the Biosphere' considers 11 Earth system processes, examining their current status and proposing appropriate boundaries. The chapter entitled 'A Safe and Just Space for Humanity' defines inclusive and sustainable economic development, given the constraints of an 'environmental ceiling' and a 'social foundation' of human needs. Living within the doughnut, they call it.

The second section, 'Getting to True Sustainability', explores implications of the gaps remaining between present realities and a truly sustainable future. In 14 chapters, it examines what it will take in the way of actions, policies, behavioural and institutional changes, and reductions in the scale of human activity, to realise a truly sustainable society. There are excellent chapters on energy, agriculture and strategies for individual and societal change.

Section three, 'Open in Case of Emergency', addresses a topic that most discussions of sustainability choose not to deal with: whether and how we should prepare for possible catastrophic global environmental disruption. 'Teaching for Turbulence', the first of 11 chapters in this section, will be of particular interest to those involved in tertiary environmental studies and science programs. A chapter on Cuba post-Soviet support ('Lessons from a Forced Decline') teaches a great deal about adaptation and resilience. Additional chapters on effective crisis governance, climate change and displacements, and shaping community response to catastrophe, add to the toolkit for use if required.

The book includes 30 'boxes' or sidebars, with profiles, stories, and facts and figures that complement the basic text, as well as an abundance of tables and figures.

I am a big fan of the *State of the World* series and this is my favourite volume so far. It includes chapters (extended essays, really) by leaders in their fields - freshwater specialist Sandra Postel, environmental educator David W. Orr and ecological economists Herman Daly and Robert Costanza, among them. And it covers topics of crucial importance today: making the transition from a culture of consumerism to one that sustains the planet; transforming the corporation into a force for good; and nurturing political leadership.

State of the World 2013 is a comprehensive reference for teachers, researchers, consultants and policy and planning specialists whose work touches on environmental sustainability - and a great text for students whose studies cover that area. Selected chapters should be part of every business school curriculum and studied by anyone aspiring to a position of leadership or influence in government or the community. Heck, the book is for anyone who cares deeply about the future and wants to play an active part in shaping it.

Kim Stanley Robinson put it nicely in the final chapter (p. 380) when he wrote:

We can see our present danger, and we can also see our future potential ... Living cleanly and well on a healthy biosphere, sharing Earth with the rest of the creatures who rely on it. This is not just a dream but a responsibility, a project. And things we can do now to start on this project are all around us, waiting to be taken up and lived.

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