

Book review

World on the Edge – How to Prevent Environmental and Economic Collapse

Lester Brown. Earthscan, London 2011, ISBN 978-1-84971-274-3 (paperback), £12.99, 240 pp.

This is not the book to read when you are feeling down, but another contribution to the sustainability doomsday scenario. The majority of the book provides a competent global survey of how we have been eating into the world's resources to satisfy the growing needs of an expanding population without any thought of future consequences. The book is split into four parts. The first two, 'A deteriorating foundation' and 'The consequences' charter the history of abuse that we have and continue to subject upon our natural resources of water, agricultural land and energy and the effects that these have on climate change, food supply, population growth, urbanisation and failing states. Brown states in the Preface that 'there is hope. Without it this book would not exist.' So, parts 3 and 4 discuss the solution 'plan B' and saving civilisation.

I am not convinced about plan B, which has four components: an 80% cut in global carbon dioxide emissions by 2020; stabilisation of the world's population at about 8 billion people by 2040; eradication of poverty; and restoration of the earth's natural systems to include reforestation, soil conservation, fishery restoration and aquifer stabilisation. The cost of achieving this is estimated at an additional \$185 billion per year, which represents only 12% of the world military budget. While this is a laudable proposition, I fear that it is a simplistic academic response. Brown gives no consideration to the self-interests and power of global corporates or to political greed and protectionism.

The book is easy to read, although the constant repetition of the same facts can be annoying. However, this is inevitable when trying to split sustainability systems into four separate sections. Brown also provides a number of fascinating insights into how our natural support systems are being eroded and heading for collapse. I read with increasing frustration his documentation of how farmers use 70% of the world's water demand for irrigation, how they are depleting aquifers and over-pumping wells, which leads to water shortages and shrinking harvests. How do we combat this self-interest of countries, politicians and people? But then I thought of the subsistence farmer in the developing world who is striving for survival and is not aware of his actions: can we tell him to stop drawing water?

The first two sections of the book are well researched but inevitably recent events have overtaken analysis. When talking about failing states, Brown states that the most conspicuous indication of state failure is a breakdown in law and order and the related loss of personal security. In 2010, the Failed States Index puts Somalia at the top, with Afghanistan at 6 and Yemen at number 15. There is no mention of Egypt, Libya, Syria or Morocco. Brown is, however, prophetic when he states 'Conditions of state failure may be a long time in the making, but the collapse itself can come quickly'. Events in the Middle East have certainly demonstrated this.

To summarise, the book is an interesting, if depressing, read and is challenging and thought-provoking. However, I am not convinced that plan B is implementable and a more worldly-wise solution is needed.

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