

Impact assessment writ large

Angus Morrison-Saunders

The State of the World Atlas, 8th edn, by Dan Smith

Earthscan, 2008, 144 pages, £10, ISBN 978-1-84407-573-7

Impact assessment practitioners who like to step back and consider the bigger picture (e.g. along the lines of the ‘think globally, act locally’ mantra) should appreciate this atlas. It is a book for quickly flicking through to find the information you seek. While there are several ‘state of the world’ type publications available, this one is map- and image-based with very little text. Navigation is easy with the book divided into seven parts (War and Peace, Health of the People, Health of the Planet are three of them). Each opening presents a full world map spread for a specific topic using colour codings to represent overall country characteristics.

I appreciated the author’s honesty in the Introduction to the atlas where he urges readers to ‘watch out for the trap of over-reliance on facts’ (p. 12) and further on when explaining the map-based format of the book that: ‘Choices and compromises must accordingly be made — choices, essentially, about how to be inaccurate’ (p. 14). In other words, the sorts of facts

and their representation in the book are important, but it is impossible to be entirely accurate when depicting indicators across whole countries. Also the author notes that ‘the knowledge and understanding that must be called on to help shape a world of justice and fairness are not only scientific’, meaning that the data provided in the book is just the starting place for finding solutions to global sustainability issues.

I found that I had to keep my wits about me when reading the keys to the maps, because the colour scheme, symbolism and units of measurement are different for individual topics. At times I found this frustrating as it meant that it was not possible to ‘overlay’ one map (at least in my mind) on another. For instance, military spending is depicted as percentage of gross domestic product while ‘debt and aid’ use different indicators. I would have liked to have been able to compare these to see if any pattern emerged. Some data is presented in absolute values, which means that countries with a small population (e.g. Australia or New Zealand) don’t necessarily register internationally as being significant but if that same factor was presented in terms of *per capita* value, the results might well be different. To be fair, many indicators (e.g. waste generation, energy use, greenhouse gas emissions) are presented in *per capita* terms.

Overall this is an attractive and engaging book, although sobering in terms of its content. I appreciate the author’s passion for seeking to affect change through the publication of this book; a kind of impact assessment writ large.

Angus Morrison-Saunders is Senior Lecturer in Environmental Assessment, School of Environmental Science, Murdoch University, Murdoch, WA 6150, Australia; Email: a.morrison-saunders@murdoch.edu.au