

Books

Wealth of information, but no solutions

Angus Morrison-Saunders

***The Little Green Handbook: A Guide to Critical Global Trends* by Ron Nielsen**

Scribe Publications, PO Box 523, Victoria 3054, Australia, 365 pages, Aus\$35.00 (about US\$26), ISBN 1-920769-30-7

Ron Nielsen is a nuclear physicist with a fascination for the physical environment. This book evolved from public responses to radio programmes, lectures and public meetings he has given where people wanted more information on critical global environmental issues. In his own words, this book attempts:

“to provide a comprehensive summary of the essential facts and figures that we need to know in order to understand clearly global environmental changes, and to try to give a broader view of the implications for all of us if these trends continue. It surveys not only the deterioration of our physical environment but also economic, social and political trends, including the increasing tensions and conflicts between nations.”

The target audience is identified as young adults (high school and university students) as well as policy-makers, decision-makers and journalists. This is no small challenge for a book described as ‘little’; so how does it fare?

Following a short introductory chapter on causes of environmental degradation, the book is divided into seven topics:

- The population explosion;
- Diminishing land resources;
- Diminishing water resources;

- The destruction of the atmosphere;
- The approaching energy crisis;
- Social decline; and
- Conflicts and increasing killing power.

Individual chapters on each provide data and facts on environmental problems at a global scale. The final section of each chapter is entitled “The future” and provides a summary account of the current and likely environmental problems ahead. An additional chapter (“In a nutshell”) provides a summary account of the seven topics; anyone who wants to skim the contents of this book would do well to start here. The final chapter documents landmarks in time of when critical global events occurred (for instance, the starting point of the human population explosion, peak in global crude oil discoveries, peak of global fish production per person) and forecasts future such events terminating with “2045: weather-related losses cause global bankruptcy”.

A major strength of the book is the wealth of information provided, although there is considerable variance in the way that issues are described and discussed. Some environmental problems are expressed in detail and sometimes with innovative analogies or methods of evaluation. An example of the latter is the discussion of global climate change consequences in terms of the insurance industry for climate-related damage and the possibility of this leading to global bankruptcy (that is, cost of weather-related economic losses exceeds income). Discussion of population issues and the ecological footprint concept are also very detailed.

Other issues, however, are summed up in unsubstantiated assertions with little or no evidence and supporting discussion; for instance, the statement that “coral reefs all over the world are dying”. Often information is presented, but its meaning or significance is not explained. For instance, it is stated that mining activities in Latin America have resulted in “the scattering of 5,000 tonnes of mercury in forests and urban areas”, but no attempt is made to explain the consequences of this.

In terms of presentation, the factual material in

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the text is supported with tables. What is lacking, though, are figures. On several occasions, the author describes graphs of data; it would be much more effective to include the graph itself. The referencing system is also cumbersome, using endnotes in the text that direct the reader to author–date citations at the end of the book; from here, the reader needs to look through the separate list of references. When a single endnote contains three or four author–date citations, this process is frustrating to follow.

As is evident from the titles of the seven topic areas, the overall tone of the book is negative; this is a classic ‘doom and gloom’ account of the global environment. There is no attempt to explore solutions or ways in which humans could make a transition to a sustainable society. There are several exhortations in the book that we should be putting our energy into solving global problems and we should “care for our

children’s future”, but there is no guidance provided on how or what we might do. This is especially problematic in terms of the overall value of the book in light of its target audience.

In the “Introduction”, the author notes our tendency to lead busy lives and to focus only on solving local problems. It follows then that the solution to global problems will need to be couched largely in terms of opportunity for local action. Global doom and gloom messages alone do not inspire positive action — what would round off the book would be some positive examples and suggestions that might empower the reader to deal with the environmental problems.

Overall, this is an informative book that outlines global environmental problems clearly and concisely and is suitable for a lay audience seeking an introduction to environmental issues.

Making EIA effective in practice

Clive Briffett

Environmental Impact Assessment — Practical Solutions to Recurrent Problems by D P Lawrence

John Wiley and Sons, 2003, 562 pages, £56.95, ISBN 0- 471-45722-1

This book is designed to meet the EIA practitioner’s needs in dealing with ongoing problems in the investigation, preparation, management and presentation of environmental statements. It is mainly aligned to practice as conducted in Europe, USA and Canada, and Australia and New Zealand; it analyses a range of issues in a highly detailed and rigorous manner. The concerns of the author are mainly attributed to practitioners not meeting the needs of various stakeholders and the emphasis is towards more effective management of the EIA processes.

The structure of the book is unusual in the sense that EIA is not reviewed as a sequential process or as a self-entity. It is examined on its ability to be more rigorous, practical, substantive, democratic, collaborative, ethical and adaptable. It is contended that EIA has numerous multiple dimensions and

cannot therefore be successfully undertaken and implemented using one model approach or a single set of criteria. Such dimensions include varying perceptions of stakeholders, alternative means of assessing the significance and nature of potential impacts and optional ways of proceeding from project inception to proposed decision-making and implementation.

Individual chapters are devoted to each of the above abilities and contain useful case studies and checklists. For example, an EIA is deemed to be more rigorous if it is supported by comprehensive, accurate and current scientific data and it particularly addresses interactive and cumulative effects. It is more rational if supported by reasoned intellectual analysis, logic and argumentation justified by sound and systematic scientific methods. It is more substantive if provided with better integration of environmental perspectives values, and knowledge. It is more practical if based on realistic expectations and competent practice on what is practically possible in any given set of circumstances.

It is democratic if stakeholders are able to influence the planning and design processes. It is more collaborative if the public is enabled to actually conduct research and consultancy enquiries themselves at the developer’s expense. It is ethical if the outcomes appear to be fair and just to all affected groups and individuals. Compensation to indigenous communities and local inhabitants not actually benefiting from the development itself as in the case of supplying water to remote cities from the source is

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