

Will Nature Bat Last?

Book Review by John F. Rohe

"The Earth is not part of the Human Story, the human story is part of the Earth Story."

– Thomas Berry, Harvard seminar on environmental values, April 9, 1996.

His career started as a farmer. The *Washington Post* now calls him "one of the world's most influential thinkers." The *Telegraph* of Calcutta recognizes him as the "Guru of the environmental movement." He has received twenty-two honorary degrees and has authored or coauthored forty-seven books.

Since 1974, when he founded the World Watch Institute, his finger has been on the pulse of the planet's health. In the course of monitoring and reporting on groundwater

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Eco-Economy: Building an Economy for the Earth

by Lester R. Brown

New York: W. W. Norton & Co.

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\$15.95 paperback, or download free of
charge from the Earth Policy Institute
website: <www.earth-policy.org>.



depletion, soil erosion, global warming, population, migration, toxic emissions, biodiversity losses, and collapsed marine biology, Lester R. Brown has become known as a no-nonsense numbers cruncher. His statistics have conferred legitimacy upon Yogi Berra's maxim: "Nature bats last."

Realistic but dreaded statistics appeared in Brown's annual State of the World Reports (starting in 1984) and Vital Signs (starting in 1992). Nevertheless, an optimistic side still lurks beneath Brown's acquired sensitivity to degraded natural systems. His views of an "eco-economy" are as revolutionary as the Copernican challenge of 1543.

Our aggressive consumption conspires with teeming population pressure against global life-support systems. Natural resources are dismantled, manipulated, and soon relegated to a landfill. Disposable cities even follow last year's Christmas gifts in a solid waste stream. Few will question the need for a transition to sustainability. But how?

Brown founded the Earth Policy Institute (EPI) in May, 2001. With the transition from the World Watch

Institute, he moves from scooping nature's news to shaping it. According to EPI's website, <www.earth-policy.org>, the organization provides a vision of what an environmentally sustainable economy – an eco-economy – looks like. It offers glimpses of how to get from here to there.

Unquestionably, balance will be restored to finite life-supporting natural systems. And there is a plan to get us there. Either we can do the planning, or the planning can be left to universal laws of nature. Brown's vision offers the more civil transition.

This book asks whether the environment is a subset of the economy, or whether the economy is a subset of the environment. Economists and ecologists part company on this issue. According to Brown, our life-support system is endangered whenever economists prevail in constituting the environment as a subset of the economy.

Brown's optimism shines as he unveils an image of a sustainable economy. Here we peacefully coexist with natural surroundings. We strike a responsible balance. His vision for sustainability includes solar/hydrogen energy, reusable materials, increased water productivity, biodiversity conservation, cities for people (rather than cars), and reduction of global population through female empowerment.

The transition to sustainability will require foresight, insight, and cooperation. It will be accelerated by shifting the tax burden away from wages and onto resource-depleting, fossil fuel-consuming activities. He looks with favor upon carbon taxes. Brown's eco-economy fosters incentives for recycling and for new energy technologies. He also promotes voting with our wallets through "eco-labeling"; i.e., labeling environmentally sound practices and products.

Progress toward a sustainable state is retarded by certain governmental subsidies. For example, hefty taxpayer support of roads and for access to cheap fossil fuels discourage the use of more efficient transit.

Brown emphasizes the urgency of this transition. We find ourselves on a perilous, self-reinforcing cycle of degradation and hardship. This cycle is not without precedent. Three early civilizations disintegrated on

environmentally unsustainable economic paths when technology outpaced the wisdom to use it.

The early Sumerian civilization of the fourth millennium B.C. utilized sophisticated engineering concepts for irrigation systems. A complex social organization managed the operation. Sumerians had the first cities and written language. Dammed water used for irrigation raised crop yields. Over time, the process led to an accumulation of salt. This reduced soil productivity. The civilization perished.

The Mayan civilization, near what is now Guatemala, flourished from 250 A.D. until its collapse 650 years later. Deforestation and soil erosion led to food scarcity. This set the stage for deadly competition among Mayan cities.

A similar fate awaited the burgeoning population on Easter Island in the South Pacific. The island was settled by humans around 400 A.D. As fishing techniques improved, the population flourished and increased exponentially until it breached the carrying capacity of 20,000. Scarcities led to depopulation and cannibalism.

Brown poses an "unanswerable question": "Did the Sumerians understand that rising salt content in the soil was reducing their wheat yields? If they knew, were they simply unable to muster the political support to lower water tables, just as we today are struggling unsuccessfully to reduce carbon emissions?"

In a seemingly comfortable, albeit unsustainable, lifestyle we are lulled into a sense of security. Brown, on the other hand, is no stranger to the environmental consequences of poor planning. As a reporter on the human drama in collapsing ecosystems for over a quarter century, he is on comfortable terrain to formulate a visionary policy.

If this were the end of history, we might be able to justify the continued unsustainable depletion of natural resources. But maybe this is not history's end. We might still become the ancients. Our actions might still be judged by future historians. When our page of history is turned by those living with the consequences, Lester R. Brown holds a promise for us: that we might yet possibly be remembered as good ancestors. •