

Review: In Search of Sustainability

By Jenny Goldie, Bob Douglas and Bryan Furnass

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Jenny Goldie, Bob Douglas and Bryan Furnass. *In Search of Sustainability*.
Collingwood, Victoria, Australia, 2005. 187 pp. ISBN 0 643 09062 2 \$AU
29.95.

This book is a collection of essays that together provide a broad overview of key issues in the movement towards sustainability. It inevitably reflects aspects of the Australian natural and political environment. However, the issues discussed will all arise, in greater or lesser degree, in any other country. I would recommend it very highly to all who have a central interest in sustainability.

In Search of Sustainability opens with an important summary by the editors of the reasons why sustainability is a contemporary imperative. The concluding essay, by Ian Lowe, returns to this question and provides a forward-looking perspective. Lowe opens by appropriately quoting the UNEP statement that "Doing nothing is no longer an option."

One series of chapters deal with the natural environment:

- * Land Use and Ecosystems by John Williams and Denis Saunders
- * Water by Peter Cullen, who subtitles his contribution as 'the key to sustainability in a dry land'
- * Climate Change by Graeme Pearman
- * Energy by Andrew Blakers

Another group focuses on the socio-political environment:

- * Health and Well Being by Tony McMichael
- * Inequality and Conflict in International Relations by Colin Butler
- * The Core Problem of Transition to a Post-Growth Society by Clive Hamilton and Richard Denniss
- * Urban Design and Transport by Peter Newman
- * Work by John Burgess and Julia Connell
- * Population by Jenny Goldie

It is obviously impossible to do justice to summarizing the content, essay by essay, when each is already a tightly structured summary of complex issues. But given the comprehensive stupidity of some of our major political leaders,

it may be useful to draw attention to two chapters in particular. Colin Butler provides a well-balanced critique of international inequity. At this time, in the wake of worldwide response to the Asian tsunami, one can feel some optimism, but we can already see the metaphysical fences being erected to keep out the central issue of inequity. In spite of his balanced and open perspective, Butler states one of the core barriers to change very directly:

. . . Australia has internalised neither the reality of globalisation nor the threat of unsustainability. The lifestyle of both the US and Australia is contributing to the erosion of sustainability as well as to increased resentment . . . (p. 37)

Perhaps Butler does not go far enough—he accepts the use of the term “terrorism,” when he might have pointed out how far this very term reinforces the current hegemony of the contemporary U.S.--led empire. Perhaps a clearer understanding might emerge if it were more widely recognised that “terrorism” is the patriotic military force of oppressed peoples, and follows in the long tradition built upon the battle for independence and freedom in both the U.S. and France.

Hamilton and Denniss provide a close examination of the ways in which national governments resist change in their own policies. Modernist societies have been based upon the assumption that economic growth per se is essential to development and wellbeing. The authors show how blind adherence to the economic growth doctrine is directly responsible for many of the most destructive policies and decisions. Importantly, the core argument of their essay is that continuing emphasis upon economic affluence is not leading to genuinely higher living standards, greater wellbeing or increased happiness. They (and others) base their argument upon extensive research evidence.

My only significant criticism is that the editors did not include an essay on the potential role of spirituality and religion in working towards sustainability. Certainly, one cannot assume that religious institutions will choose to work for sustainability, but there are outstanding examples, and the World Bank has chosen to publish an important review of this potential contribution: Martin Palmer with Victoria Finlay. Faith in Conservation. Washington, DC: World Bank, Directions in Development Series. 2003. 166 pp. ISBN 0 8213 5559 7.

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