Book review

The Top 50 Sustainability Books

Wayne Vasser. Greenleaf Publishing Ltd, Sheffield, 2009, ISBN-13: 978-1-90609-332-7, £25.00, 255 pp.

The book contains a synopsis of each of the top 50 sustainability books as voted by the Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leaders (CPSL) alumni of more than 3000 senior leaders, presented in date order rather than popularity. In most cases the synopsis is accompanied by comments from the author(s) on what views and issues they were trying to portray. As the comments are from interviews carried out in 2008, some authors can reflect on changes over the last 20 or 30 years since they were first published and how these changes have proven or otherwise their original treatise.

The book is, in the main, a factual synopsis with little critical review from the author, but Visser does extract five 'Key ideas' from each book which is useful for casual browsers. The book could have three potential uses: as a research reference, especially as there are additional pointers to further reading and information; as an overview to aspects of sustainability which may stimulate interest in reading one or two of the referenced books; or as a fascinating short history of the development of sustainable thinking from Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac* (Leopold, 1947) to The Stern Report (Stern, 2007).

It is interesting to pick out the change in trends over time, from the initial environmental concerns of Carson (1962) to technological fixes such as those described in *Factor Four* (Von Weizsacker *et al.*, 1988) and then to the more integrated nature-inspired solutions of *Nature Capitalism* (Hawken *et al.*, 1999). For this reviewer, the most significant message reflected in many of the synopses is that we have lost the ability to see the whole system, the big picture, and we have become disconnected through the pursuit of wealth and consumerism from the earth's natural systems. We have created inherent conflict between the growing human demands and the earth's finite resources – and technology is not the ultimate solution.

The role of business in leading the move to a more sustainable world is investigated from 'Changing courses', the Business Council for Sustainable Development's response to the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio (Schmidheiny and BCSD, 1992) and *Capitalism at the Crossroads* (Hart,

2005). Again it is interesting to see how the emphasis has changed over the years in that business rather than governments is now seen to have the power to create change. One of the key ideas drawn from Naomi Klein's book *No Logo* (Klein, 1999) is that multinational corporations have become so big that they have superseded governments and have become the ruling political bodies of our era. Many other authors contend that business is more than making money; it has a responsibility to change things for the better.

In the conclusion to the book Mike Peirce, Deputy Director of CPSL, bemoans the fact that many sustainability books are more referenced than read, and in many ways the compendium helps to perpetuate this. However, at least this book is a readily available guide to ensure that referenced facts are correct.

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