
There is little disagreement among scientists over the declining state of the ecosphere or humanity’s role in changing the face of the Earth. What is in dispute is whether these things matter. The more pessimistic observers see the domination of the Earth by humans and the deterioration of nature as ultimately fatal to civilization itself. Energy analyst Richard Duncan (1993) concludes that as petroleum runs out, the life-expectancy of our western techno-industrial society “is less than 100 years” — counting from the 1930s! Similarly, social scientists Smith and Sauer-Thompson (1998) have no doubt that industrial society will inevitably “self-destruct, producing massive ecological damage, social chaos, and megadeath”. Such enervating analyses imply there is nothing we can do to prevent the total collapse of global civilization.

At the other end of the spectrum, we can rejoice in the ebullient optimism — shared by many conventional economists — of the late Julian Simon: “We have in our hands now ... the technology to feed, clothe, and supply energy to an ever-growing population for the next seven billion years ...” (Simon, cited in Bartlett, 1996). From this perspective, all is well — we do not need to do anything to sustain global civilization but to stay our present, increasingly market-driven, global development course. With such diametrically opposing assessments, both starting from present circumstances and held with equal conviction, it is little wonder that ordinary citizens and policy-makers alike are confused about the human prospect and what, if anything, to do about it.

Which is why we need books like Sharing the World. In this slim, highly readable volume, authors Michael Carley and Philippe Spapens report on the premises and major findings of the ‘Sustainable Europe Campaign’ (SEC). SEC was initiated in 1992 and designed to develop a practical policy-relevant interpretation of sustainable development. It starts from the premise that global ecological change does, in fact, pose a real threat to economic stability and geopolitical security, but that it is within human capacity to do something about it. SEC takes as a major organizing principle the concept of ‘environmental space’, first advanced by Dutch economist Hans Opshoor in 1987.

Following SEC, Sharing the World is based on the following three principles of sustainability.
1. Global carrying capacity (environmental space) is limited, and even present levels of resource consumption need to be reduced to ecologically sustainable levels.
2. While prevailing economic values have made a virtue of private greed, sustainability implies an equitable sharing of the Earth’s productive capacity and more balanced opportunities for development among countries.
3. Despite today’s pre-occupation with material growth, human well-being is based on a broad spectrum of values that should also be fully reflected in public policy.
The book addresses these principles in eight concise chapters. The first describes key background issues and challenges to sustainability, and provides an extended rationale for the environmental space concept. Environmental space analysis is used to generate a “quantitative and qualitative assessment of sustainable resource use at the national level compared to the national ‘fair share’ calculated on a global or regional basis, and policies and value changes to accommodate development based on that fair share without loss of quality of life” (p. 9).

The second chapter reviews some of the symptoms of the excessive economic production/consumption on a finite planet. The basic thesis is that industrialism is all but out of control and we have already passed the ‘wild frontier to full world’ status.

Chapter three recognizes that sustainability ultimately comes down to mutually acceptable ways of managing the global commons. It examines in detail the consumption and waste production patterns of the North (exemplified by the United States) and the South (China). It then cautions on the implications of the newly industrializing countries of the South following the northern development path, given that the North has effectively already occupied the available environmental space and has run up a substantial ecological debt. Indeed, existing (and growing) over-consumption in the North and the threat of over-consumption in the South is identified as the major challenge for sustainability.

The remaining chapters expand on the principle of, and ways of assigning, “fair shares in environmental space” (Chapters 4 and 5) and on some of the ancillary means of achieving sustainability: eco-innovation and the anticipated revolution in production efficiency (Chapter 6); rethinking the consumer society (Chapter 7); and creating national and global frameworks for sustainable production and consumption (Chapter 8). Each chapter is profusely illustrated with supportive tables, graphs, and detail ‘boxes’ for more serious readers. Most have one or more ‘guest essays’ on particular topics by noted analysts or commentators. Significantly, Sharing the World builds throughout on many of the core principles of ecological economics — indeed, it is among the best books on applied ecological economics to date.

American readers in particular may be impressed (or alarmed) by the extent to which this quintessentially European analysis emphasizes community values, the common good and the need for sure-footed public policy to correct for obvious market failures, as key ingredients in the sustainable development cake. Pity for sustainability that we have spent the past two decades trying to convince the world that there is no such thing as society, that the environment should be privatized and that the market is the well-spring of all social value.

Any book that takes on so complex and controversial a subject as sustainable development will have weaknesses in the eyes of any beholder. Two stand out to this observer. First, Carley and Spapens assume that the so-called knowledge-based society is automatically less material-intensive than heavy industrial ones. This is a testable hypothesis, but far from proved. While computer programmers, market analysts, and other high-end service providers may not be personally engaged in ecologically destructive occupations, their high incomes ensure correspondingly elevated levels of material consumption. They live in ever-bigger houses and the production activities that deliver their cars, computers, stereos, and all the other paraphernalia of the consumer lifestyle have simply moved ‘offshore’ (most notably to the newly industrializing countries that our authors suggest should skip the manufacturing phase of development). Thus, it is a plausible counter-hypothesis that all else being equal, the information-based economy is, in gross terms, the most materially intensive yet to evolve.

Second, in its effort to be optimistically upbeat, the book acquires a certain air of naivete around the politics of social change. Carley and Spapens seem to assume that the weight of data and the logic of their argument is all that is needed to convince the world to change its errant ways. In particular, they pay very little attention to the political power of vested interests (particularly the transnational corporate sector), who have the most to lose from a shift from the status quo toward a more equitable world.
Quibbles aside, Sharing the World is an outstanding contribution to the sustainable development debate. It will be of particular value in university courses ranging from ecological economics through political science and international development, to environmental/developmental ethics. Perhaps as important, the book should be read by policy-makers and politicians everywhere (if only because it provides informed citizens with a surfeit of potentially embarrassing questions to pose would-be leaders during political meetings at election time).

References


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About 4500 protected areas exist worldwide, of which one-half are located in the tropics — covering some 5% of tropical rain forests. During the major part of this century, the establishment of protected areas was the standard approach in biological conservation. The setting aside of natural habitats free from human uses originated with the establishment of Yellowstone National Park in 1872 and was widely adopted by developing and developed countries. Nature reserves and national parks were believed to preserve natural habitats and their species in a more or less pristine condition. Recent research, however, indicates that humans have modified ecosystems in remote rainforests that previously were believed to be untouched by humans (Balée, 1992; Posey, 1992), and that human use of landscapes may promote biological diversity by creating a mosaic of patches at the landscape level (Gomes-Pompa and Kaus, 1992; Lindbladh and Bradshaw, 1998). In fact, viewing natural parks as undisturbed ’nature museums’ may lead to management surprises, as in the active fire suppression in Yellowstone National Park which, a decade ago, eventually led to the build-up of one catastrophic fire that burnt half the park down.

At the same time, the establishment of protected areas has often involved conflicts with local residents living within and adjacent to these areas. For example, traditional societies have suffered land losses with subsequent loss of cultural identity. Thus, the expansion of protected areas has often taken place at considerable social costs to local communities in terms of access to land, wildlife, and other resources (Gadgil and Guha, 1993). Not surprisingly, park managers have cited conflicts with local residents as their most serious problem (Primack, 1993), indicating that the protected area approach is problematic in practice.

The volume Last Stand calls for a renewed interest and defense of the protected area approach, despite its failure in many tropical areas, and concludes by offering a ‘new protection paradigm’ for tropical parks. This multi-authored book, edited by Randall Kramer, Carel van Schaik and Julie Johnson, portrays the situation for tropical protected areas as highly critical and analyses the relevant causes of this. Ultimately, the editors argue, the steady increase of human populations is the main cause behind tropical deforestation and biodiversity loss.

At the same time, Last Stand offers a rather heavy critique against the alternative conservation approaches that emerged in the early 1970s, which emphasized man’s role as part of natural landscapes. For example, UNESCO’s Man and the Biosphere Program developed primarily from the recognition of the need to integrate protected