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Review: State of the World 2013: Is Sustainability Still Possible?

Edited By Linda Starke

Reviewed by Byron Anderson

DeKalb, Illinois, USA

Starke, Linda, ed. *State of the World 2013: Is Sustainability Still Possible?* Washington, DC: Island Press, 2013. xxi, 441 pp. ISBN: 9781610914499 US \$22.00, paperback; 9781610914581 US \$21.99 Ebook. Printed on recycled, acid-free paper.

Since 1984, the *State of the World* has presented annually a report on the progress toward a sustainable society. The book derives from The Worldwatch Institute in partnership with Island Press. Starting with a well-laid out timeline covering December 2011 to November 2012 listing recent progress and setbacks in achieving sustainability, the book proceeds with thirty-four articles covering many topics, such as, valuing indigenous peoples, crisis governance, and assessing energy alternatives. The volume narrows to an annual theme, this year being “Is sustainability still possible?” The subject is handled in three parts: developing sustainability metrics and quantification, achieving true sustainability, and steps that could be taken to prepare for or avert an environmental crisis.

The word sustainable has “morphed from its original meaning into something like ‘a little better for the environment than the alternative’” (p. 5). A number of authors stress that we are running out of time and that efforts to date in achieving global sustainability do not go far enough. Other articles focus on sustainable successes, for example, “Sustaining Freshwater and Its Dependents” provides examples of individuals and corporations shrinking their water footprint, including ways to consume less. While some articles deal with the possibility of a catastrophic environmental disruption, others describe what it would take to offset a catastrophe, for example, building political strategies or cultivating resilience. Several articles point out that our consumer culture has transcended Earth’s resources to the point that we are consuming at the ecological capacity of 1.5 Earths. The article, “Re-engineering Cultures to Create a Sustainable Civilization” suggests that we need a culture of sustainability, where moderation replaces affluence. Needless to say, building such a global society would be a long-term daunting task.

Science fiction writer, Kim Stanley Robinson, interestingly authors the final chapter, “Is It Too Late?” Robinson would change the question, “Is it too late?” to “How much damage will we let happen?” Then, he flips the revised question to its positive formulation, “How much of the biosphere will we save?” For Robinson, *this* is the real question.

The articles are enhanced by additional information found in offset boxes, tables, figures, photos, notes and an index. Author backgrounds include individuals affiliated with The Worldwatch Institute, other environmental organizations, academic

researchers, especially in the sciences, public policy and economics, and other. Lay readers could profit from the book, but it is targeted more toward students of environmental studies. This book is recommended for academic and research libraries and related science collections.

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