

The State Of The World

As the list of environmental woes afflicting the planet increases, the Worldwatch Institute is striving to mitigate the results. In their annual report on the condition of the earth, they call for an "Environmental Revolution" to change ways of thinking and jumpstart the world's population on the path towards a sustainable society.

State of the World 1992: A Worldwatch Institute Report on Progress Toward a Sustainable Society
by Lester R. Brown et al. W.W. Norton and Co., 1992. \$10.95.

By William F. Fehrenbach

The report released by the Worldwatch Institute entitled, *State of the World 1992: A Worldwatch Institute Report on Progress Toward a Sustainable Society*, concerns itself with the overall impact of human behaviour on the natural environment and details the price we are paying for "human progress." The Report—a collection of chapters on various topics written by different authors—provides a basis for monitoring the effects of global development and examines a wide array of options that could reconcile the disparity between economic growth and environmental sensibility. While the chapters are both diverse and distinct in topic and approach, they are tied together by a similar thread: in an environmentally interdependent world, no country (nor individual) can separate its fate from that of the earth as a whole.

The planet stands at the proverbial crossroads. On one side are those who claim that, in fact, little needs to be done for the environment. On the other, are those (including Worldwatch) who argue the necessity of embarking upon an "Environmental Revolution" that would rival the Agricultural and Industrial Revolutions in terms of importance and the magnitude of change.

State of the World makes clear that the physical tools required to bring about

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an "environmental" revolution (or even minor changes for that matter) are already in our hands. For instance, we already have access to refillable containers, compact fluorescent light bulbs, photovoltaic cells, wind powered electric generators, and contraceptives. The greatest problem now lies with our approach and attitude—a problem, *State of the World* rightly points out, that stretches from the individual to government to multi-national corporations. All that is left to do is to change our ways of thinking.



The Report: A Motivation for Change?

In the absence of a comprehensive annual assessment by the United Nations or any national government (Global 2000 and UN 1999 excepted), *State of the World* is now given semi-official status by those same organizations. Copies of the Report are distributed to members of the U.S. Congress, CEO's of Fortune 500 corporations, and members of the Scandinavian, Belgian and French Parliaments. It has been translated into 23 languages and

used in more than 1,300 universities in the United States alone. Such a wide distribution attests to the perceived credibility and reliability of the Report.

Despite its all-encompassing nature (to address the environmental realities of the entire planet is indeed a formidable task), *State of the World* is a valuable piece of literature, capable of contributing impetus in motivating society to adopt a more sustainable framework and to accept the seriousness of our actions and their negative effect on the environment.

Yet, *State of the World* is also somewhat of a paradox. It presents global problems in one sentence while in the next it diminishes their significance in order to stress hope. At the same time, it intermingles an urging for some form of environmental revolution while detailing solutions that are less serious and less far reaching—minor adjustments to business as usual. If the Report cannot stand the heat of the fire it wants to see created, then it should not tempt people with only smoke. (But, perhaps, if enough people make these minor adjustments, then a spark will be created).

After I read *State of the World*, I felt that we are making too many promises we cannot keep, simply to ease our collective conscience about the plight of the planet. My fear is that many readers will walk away denying that we are facing a serious environmental challenge, dismissing it all as mere doom and gloom. Others will feel too insufficient to face the challenge head on. Unfortunately, the old saying that a horse can be led to water,

but cannot be made to drink, is applicable.

A Fundamental Restructuring

The increasingly familiar litany of environmental concerns faced by the planet forms the starting point and continual basis of the Report. Anywhere between 50 and 400 species are lost forever each day. The ozone over population centers is disappearing more quickly than scientists had predicted. Each year the human species adds 92 million to their ranks—the equivalent of a new Mexico. In response to which, encouragement to phase out fossil fuels, to shift to a reuse-recycle economy, to protect the ozone layer by reducing air pollution, and to minimize hazardous waste generation is constantly repeated.

State of the World arms itself with an arsenal of policy planning tools. In the opening article, entitled "Denial in the Decisive Decade", Sandra Postel asserts that the elimination of environmental threats to our future will require a "fundamental restructuring of many elements of society." She combines grim statistics about the planet's health with equally disconcerting realities of unmet human needs.

One in three children worldwide is malnourished. 1.2 billion people lack safe water to drink. Three million children die annually from diseases that could be prevented by immunizations. In order to provide for basic human needs while minimizing our impact on the environment, rethinking of our basic values and conception of progress is desperately called for. Despite this summons to extensive action, "Denial in the Decisive Decade" ultimately takes a pessimistic outlook on humanity's chances for survival. We are too tempted to deny the severity of environmental threats, she believes.

According to Postel, who cites the *World Military and Social Expenditures 1991*, the global budget for military spending in 1991 was \$980 billion. She asserts that a mere 2% of this budget would be sufficient to provide primary education, health care, family planning services, safe drinking water and adequate nutrition to the world's population.

The question that immediately enters my mind is what would 50, 75 or even 100% of military spending accomplish? What is preventing us from applying a similar sized budget to stopping habitat destruction of all species including our own? The world is literally dying for such investments in more efficient and environmentally sustainable industries.

Chapters such as "Building a Bridge to Sustainable Energy", and "Shaping Cities" demonstrate how to arrive at the desired future. They are replete with basic strategies and sustainable practices

Ryan's "Conserving Biological Diversity," is that solutions to current problems make both economic as well as ecological sense. Throughout the world, high levels of agricultural uniformity and crop specialization have left harvests, and their farmers, extremely vulnerable to pest and disease outbursts. In 1991, the genetic similarity of orange trees in Brazil led to the worst outbreak of infection in that nation's entire history. Crop output was reduced to zero. Based on this localized lesson, other countries are currently learning the benefits of avoiding monoculture

crop production and especially the exclusive use of genetically altered identical hybrids.

Ryan continues by stating the now obvious wisdom that protection of habitat is the single most effective means of conserving species diversity. Yet, he fails to recognize the encouraging signs of governmental action to address the problem of species elimination. In the past, government strategies involved employing multiple-use plans for utilizing remaining natural areas. Now, through increasing legislation, wild animals are forced less and less to compete with the logger, miner or cattle rancher for what should be considered their inherent right to utilize the natural abode.

In the ninth entry, entitled "Creating Sustainable Jobs in Industrial Countries," Michael Renner points out that within the U.S. manufacturing sector, five industries—which include

primary metal production, paper mills, oil refining, chemical and stone processing, along with clay and glass production—account for 80 to 85% of both energy used and toxins released into the environment by manufacturing. Meanwhile, the five industries account for only 17% of the nation's employment within the manufacturing sector. They use 21% of energy consumed in the U.S. economy overall, but provide only 3% of the nation's jobs. Such statistics make obvious the huge disparity that exists between the benefits derived from these industries and the costs they inflict on the environment.

Moreover, the proper technologies

State of the World

Lester R. Brown

and Holly Brough
Alan Durning
Christopher Flavin
Hilary French
Jodi Jacobson
Nicholas Lenssen
Marcia Lowe
Sandra Postel
Michael Renner
John Ryan
Linda Starke
John Young



A Worldwatch Institute Report on
Progress Toward a Sustainable Society

for policymakers as well as examples of countries, corporations, villages and individuals who have taken the initiative that places them far ahead of mainstream society on the path to a sustainable society. For example, Japan's goals for lowering petroleum dependence had the effect of causing tremendous improvements in energy efficiency in the late 1980s. Furthermore, Europe's recently legislated carbon emission goals could have the same effect.

Both Economically and Ecologically Smart

The message of the second article, John

already exist to provide increased resource-use-efficiency, along with new methods of energy and material goods production. Sadly, however, society, industry and government are dragging their heels in putting them into everyday practice. The slow move to new sustainable technologies is particularly surprising because increasing documentation demonstrates that such technologies, while good for the environment, also provide increased employment. Renner asserts that generating 1,000 gigawatt hours of electricity per year requires 116 workers in a coal fired hydro plant, but 248 workers in a solar thermal facility and 542 on a wind farm.

Not a Spectator Sport

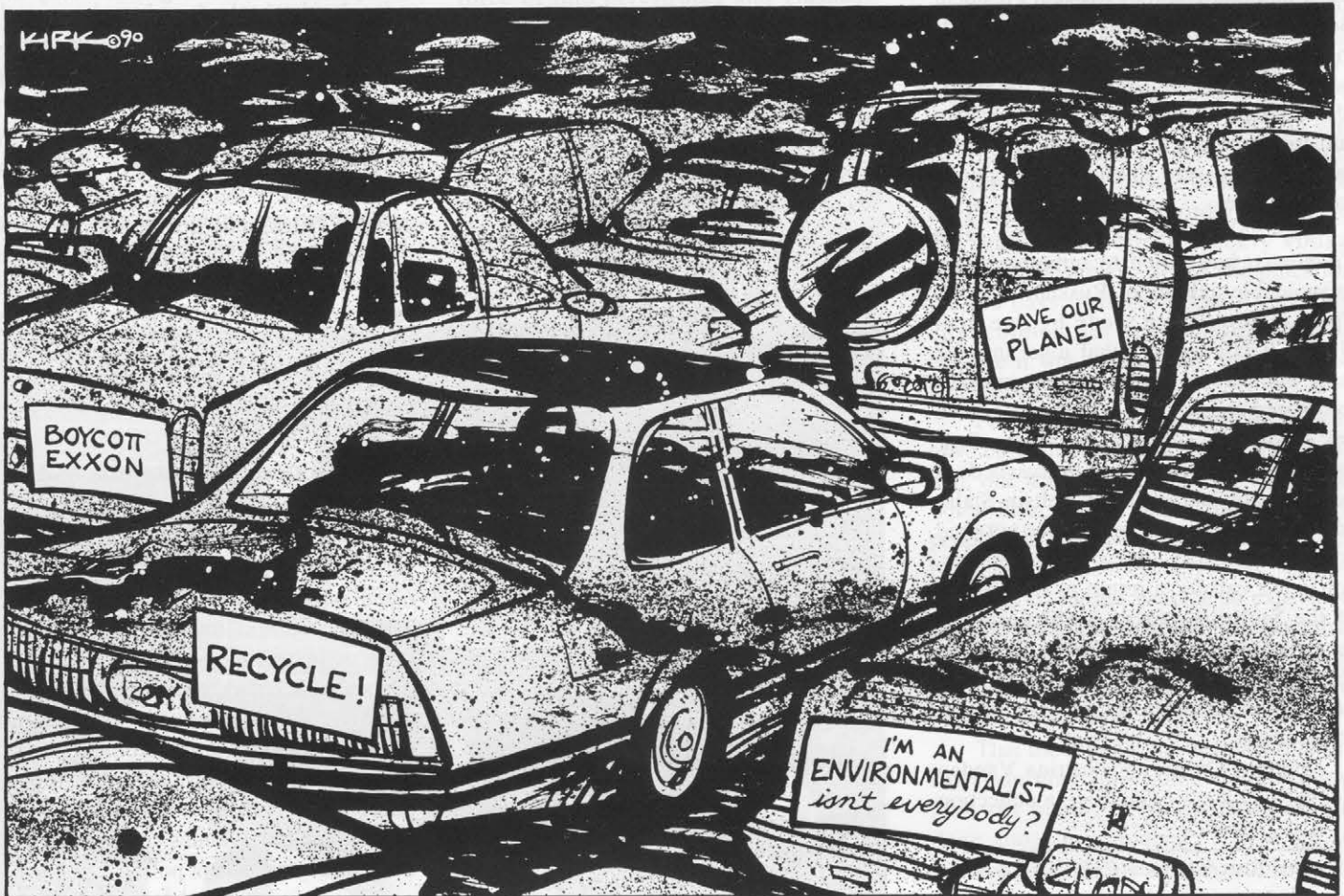
The remainder of *State of the World* is often repetitive or too wide in scope. Chapters such as “Reforming the Livestock Economy” and “Mining the Earth” are specific in content and repeat the general themes found throughout the collec-

tion. The chapter entitled “Improving Women’s Reproductive Health” is notably out of place and often contradictory. While both significant and substantial, the article would fit better in a publication that is not primarily concerned with the effects of mining, nuclear energy, carbon emissions and de-forestation. The Report in other chapters advocates decreasing population while enhancing biodiversity. Yet, the chapter on reproductive health proposes to improve female fecundity and advocates abortion. I wonder how one publication can at the same time condemn the killing of other species and condone the killing of human products of conception.

Importantly, *State of the World* does not forget the Third World. The chapter on “Strengthening Global Environmental Governance” highlights the creation of the \$1.5 billion Global Environment Facility, that will finance environmental projects in developing countries. The

Report also avoids pointing the “green” finger at the standard scapegoats—typically from the Third World—who are clear cutting rainforests or overgrazing rangelands. As it should be, the blame for our current degraded environmental state is placed evenly between developed and developing nations.

In chapter eleven, “Launching the Environmental Revolution”, Lester R. Brown leaves us all with an important message to ponder. He poignantly states that environmentalism has long been viewed by society much like a sporting event. Thousands of spectators sit in the stands watching, while only a handful are on the field actively endeavouring to influence the changes that are necessary to forestall the ecological collapse of the planet. Brown states that “success depends on erasing the imaginary sidelines that separate spectators from participants. Saving the planet is not a spectator sport.”



[Kirk Anderson]