

Sandy Irvine's 'Deeply Green' Book Guide

By [Sandy Irvine](#)

A spectre is beginning to haunt the world. It is not some phantom menace. It is the all too real possibility of irreversible ecological and therefore social collapse. Modern society faces the ruination that once brought down seemingly invincible civilisations in the past. Then the collapse was comparatively local in scale; today it is global. From the melting icecaps and glaciers to the raging forest fires, devastating storms and equally destructive floods that have ravished many parts of the planet, there is evidence that humanity is facing an unprecedented crisis. Those apologists for the current social order who talked about the 'end of history' might turn to be right after all but in the completely opposite way to what they smugly envisaged.

The decisions humankind makes over the next two decades are likely to decide whether or not the Earth life-support systems are sustained or become irreversibly impoverished. Climate change seems to be proceeding faster and more damagingly than expected. But it only tops a long list of planetary ailments, some well known such as the tears in the atmosphere's protective ozone layer and the clear-cutting of whole forests, others less so such as salinisation and aquifer depletion. Some are dramatic like the collapse of many fisheries, others almost imperceptible but equally alarming, not least soil erosion and nutrient loss. Both new diseases and ones once thought conquered seem set to plague the world. Already it is too late for many other lifeforms as the holocaust of human-caused extinction rapidly mounts. Even previously common species are rapidly disappearing.

The crisis 'outside' society is mirrored within it. Despite unprecedented levels of affluence and massive leaps in technological know-how, the fabric of society is, nevertheless, coming apart at the seams. Again, there are many symptoms, from the unraveling of community bonds and disintegration of family life to a general 'dumbing down' in human culture. The intensification of work and uncertainties that plague many workplaces are further signs of a deep malaise, in which the possibility of severe economic crashes has reared its ugly head again after the long postwar boom.

Fighting Back

One chink of light in the darkening shadows is the growth of what amounts to a global resistance movement. It takes many forms and fights on many front. One of its most obvious manifestations have been the street demonstrations that have confronted world leaders at international trade talks. Some critics have talked of the 'Seattle Spirit' after one of those events. Then there are the various struggles waged against new motorways, airports, mines and other monstrous developments. The animal rights movement embodies similar energies as do those disrupting the planting of genetically modified crops.

Green political parties reflect the same general spirit. They have had a harder time establishing themselves, not least because of the corporate coffers that aid conventional parties. Yet they too have been making gains, especially at a local level. In the heart of the beast, the USA, the recent campaign

by Ralph Nader has spotlighted the degeneracy of mainstream politics and the existence of an alternative.

Such is the urgency of that crisis that many people want to get involved in activity and correspondingly give little time to study and reflection on its nature. However, without careful thought, both about deeper values and goals as well as appropriate policies and strategy, the best endeavours are likely to go round in ever decreasing circles. Public campaigning, political activity, technological research and development as well as private lifestyle changes all will suffer from loss of direction and focus if they are not guided by deep reflection and theoretical development.

There is also a danger in seeing individual issues in isolation rather than as aspects of one general systemic crisis, with related causes and linked solutions. Furthermore, in these discouraging times, it is hard to sustain individual involvement without the deep commitment that fuller understanding can bring. Last but not least, greater personal knowledge can help activists in the critical work of winning over non-converts to the cause.

Facing Reality

This guide is not just about the Earth's multiplying ills. It is also about diagnosis and possible cures. The books it lists do contain their share of doom and gloom. That is a true part of the picture. But there is an alternative. There are insuperable technological barriers to the creation of what might best be called a conserver society. There are, however, deep institutional and social obstacles to be crossed. Indeed the power of multinational corporations is only one barrier — there are deeper cultural ones. That too is part of reality.

It identifies twenty core books with suggestions for follow-up reading. It is not a pure 'top twenty' per se since the list tries to provide coverage of a range of issues, rather than select books simply on intrinsic merits alone. Together, these works constitute a basic 'green library'. Together, they shed much light on what is wrong with the world and how we humans might learn to live in greater harmony with each other and with the rest of Nature.

One problem facing anyone wanting to find out more about the global crisis is the sheer number of books available purporting to deal with it. Yet few of these works did more than scratch the surface. Often they treated ecological concerns as just one set of issues amongst many. Seldom did they recognise the need to put the Earth first. Furthermore, too many books treat social and environmental problems as simply a lack of managerial expertise and technical prowess. The crisis goes much deeper: saving the Earth meant root and branch changes across the whole of society.

The driving forces in the planetary crisis are also often badly diagnosed. Too much heed is paid to badly designed technology. Conversely, too little attention is given to the menace of human population growth is ignored or even denied. Yet no problem can be solved on a lasting basis without, first, a stabilisation of human numbers and then their reduction, by just and socially acceptable means, to levels well within the safe carrying capacity of local environments.

The root causes of that crisis are also widely misunderstood. It is simply not good enough to blame a few 'rotten apples' as if they are somehow atypical. Similarly, it is quite false to portray the crisis as the consequence of some great oversight, misunderstanding, inadequate information, failure to communicate or even a tragic accident, a product of fortuitous circumstances. In reality they are the inevitable consequence of identifiable actions, decision-making systems and values.

The ecological 'crunch' takes the form largely of a slow but steady accumulation of problems, the necessary consequence of past choices, the cumulative effects of which are likely to be drastic, long-lasting and all-pervading. It is possible to identify many of those decisions and the people behind them. Deliberate crimes such as the burning of food 'surpluses' and other forms of corporate plundering should not be covered up. The Earth's enemies need to be named. Yet it is naive to dump all the blame on particular organisations and individuals. The waste and destructiveness that has characterised much of human history, across many types of economic system, alone suggests that a politics of 'anti-globalisation' or anti-capitalism is not enough.

In particular, we need to get away from simplistic images of progressive rank and file struggles betrayed by reactionary leaders. Ordinary people are not dupes or unwilling conscripts yoked to the treadmill of consumerism. It must be recognised that many ordinary citizens play an active, conscious, willing and indeed sometimes wilful part in the trashing of the planet. We must dump the naïve notion that, to quote one 'permaculture' book, that "if we care for people, we will care for the planet". Socially worthy measures can be as ecologically harmful and therefore unsustainable as socially unworthy ones. A more complex model of the roots of the crisis and of strategies to solve it is needed.

It is also vital to be careful in the forging of the broad alliances that will be necessary to save the earth. We should never forget that, as Gary Coates put it, "what appears at first to be merely two paths to shared goals turns out, on closer inspection, to be two separate paths to very different goals". Notions such as efficiency, 'sustained yield', 'sustainable development', environmental impact analysis and risk assessment can turn out to be anything but means to moderate excess. Instead, they often represent new attempts to intensify manipulation and exploitation, albeit with less needless waste and perhaps some cosmetic touches.

For life on Earth

The following suggestions for a basic library concentrate on books which really do look at the big picture or put their particular subject into the ecological context. It is a guide to a literature not just about but also *for* ecosystems and *all* the life they sustain. Diversity, sufficiency and stability, not homogenisation, unlimited expectations and expansion, would become the critical yardsticks of 'progress' in what the Australian physicist and leading 'ecoscience' textbook writer, G. Tyler Miller, calls a 'Sustainable Earth Society'. Concepts such as interdependence, reciprocity, balance and especially that little word 'limits' would shape the way we think about, value and do things. Sustainability must be seen in holistic terms — spiritually, psychologically, culturally, economically and, of course, environmentally — and must embrace all the Earth's 'stakeholders', humans and non-human nature.

Some readers may find this Guide partial, one-sided, emotive, even prejudiced. At one level, we plead guilty. We do take sides—we are decidedly *for* the future well-being of the planet and against values, lifestyles and institutions that threaten it. Upon the integrity and health of the Earth's life-support systems, all worthwhile goals and expectations depend so we are indeed biased in favour of ideas and activities that are ecologically sustainable, not just for the sake of humankind but all the Earth's dependants.

The Guide's perspective is fundamentally at odds, therefore, with the statement in 1987 by the president of the National Wildlife Federation, an American 'environmental' organisation, that he saw "no fundamental difference between destroying a river and destroying a bulldozer". In reality, there is literally a whole world of difference. If it is sectarian to stand out from what the American activist

Howie Wolke once called the "vast sea of raging moderation, irresponsible compromise...and unknowing (OK sometimes knowing) duplicity in the systematic destruction of the Earth", so be it.

The Guide concentrates on the core literature, material that really does address the key issues of the day. Because many people today are (or feel themselves to be) short of time are likely to read only a few books and articles, we have been really ruthless in pruning what is a voluminous literature. Hopefully, study of these works might encourage a deeper exploration of the nature of an ecologically sustainable society and the values, institutions and lifestyles appropriate to it.

This guide is primarily aimed at individuals already active on green issues. We assumed some basic familiarity with green thinking. However, we recognise that people new to the movement or who studying it perhaps for academic or journalistic reasons. We would recommend in such cases that it might be better to start with a general book like **It's a Matter of Survival** (no. 2 below) or **Let the Mountains Talk, Let the Rivers Run** (no. 13), followed by **Green History of the World** (no. 3) then a more 'positive' book such as **The Conserver Society** (no. 16). Some of the suggested follow-up reading sometimes constitute more digestible snacks than the 'first courses', some of which can be a bit heavy-going.

The Top Twenty

For those wanting a short 'indoctrination' in green thinking we have shortlisted a set of really outstanding titles that could constitute a basic book collection for any green activist. We have noted as well possible follow-up reading, sometimes individual books and sometimes individual authors whose entire 'back catalogue' will repay exploration. At the end, a number of authors are mentioned whose works deserve inclusion in what might best be called the Spiro Agnew Memorial Library of Human Wisdom. It pays to know the enemy.

1. **State of the World**

by Lester Brown, et al (Earthscan, annual)

This is a comprehensive and authoritative survey of many of the world's key trends, published each year. The press releases regularly put out by the Worldwatch Institute also provide a quick way of keeping on top of the mountain of data about the Earth's festering ills. Look them up on the Internet (www.worldwatch.org). The Institute also publishes a series of A5 booklets on specific issues in a series called the **Worldwatch Papers**, which by mid-2000 numbered more than a 150 volumes, with topics ranging from the disastrous depletion of underground water aquifers to the pestilential dangers of new (and old) diseases.

2. **It's Matter of Survival**

by Anita Gordon David Suzuki (Harper Collins, 1991).

It is difficult to pick out one book that captures the breadth and depth of today's environmental, economic and social crises, not least the way they interact. This one does convey the urgency of the situation and the dangers we face, even if global overwarming were to turn out to be an illusion cooked up by a few overheated imaginations. The book draws upon a more conventional humanist perspective rather than a deeper ecological sensibility. It is also a bit dated by now. That said, it remains a firm rebuttal of the phoney 'good news' environmentalism being peddled by the likes of Gregg Easterbrook and organisations such as the British grouping Forum for the Future, let alone latter day Panglosses like Julian Simons

and Wilfred Beckerman. It boldly underlines that most fundamental truth that, whatever the good cause, it will be a lost one unless we put the Earth first in both values, public policy and private lifestyles.

See also **Beyond the Limits** by Donella Meadows et al (Earthscan, 1992), an update of the classic **Limits to Growth**, the study originally commissioned by the Club of Rome. **The Cassandra Conference** edited by Paul Ehrlich and John Holdren (Texas AM Univ. Pr., 1987), which brings together great analysts such as George Woodwell and Earl Cook, all of whom are prepared to ask that great green question: 'how much is enough'? Statistics do date quickly, though it is possible to check for recent data from many good on-line sources not least the websites maintained by the Worldwatch Institute (see above) and that run by the David Suzuki Foundation, which also lists some follow-up studies to the above book.

Of course, it is hard to be precise about broad trends, not least their speed of development. It is easy to dismiss such warnings as 'crying wolf' when predicted disasters do not happen in the immediate future. Yet, in broad historical terms, a few decades one way or the other is of minuscule significance. Even more important is the stark reality that the damage being done by human activities to the Earth's life-support systems is cumulative and can cross the point of no return without anything dramatic highlighting the fact.

Although arguments about 'resources running out' miss the big picture about our sickening planet, it is important to consult the writings of the Australian writer Ted Trainer, some of the best pieces being in the form of magazine articles. He rigorously exposes the widespread complacency about long-term fossil fuel and mineral availability as well as unwarranted optimism about the potential of solar and other 'alternative' resource supplies.

A number of studies focus more on the political and economic aspects on the global crisis. In particular they debunk the widespread claims that a 'long boom' lies ahead and that the combination of parliamentary democracy and free market economics has successfully brought history to a happy ending. Despite, in some cases, a lack of deep ecological understanding, there is much good material in books such as **The Age of Insecurity** by Larry Elliott and Dan Atkinson (Verso, 1998), **The Case Against the Global Economy** edited by Jerry Mander and Edward Goldsmith (Sierra Club Books, 1996), **Economic Horror** by Viviane Forrester (Blackwell, 1999), **False Dawn: The Delusions of Global Capitalism** by John Gray (Granta Books, 1999), and, with focus on a particular example of the whole monster of so-called development, the Narada Valley project in India, **The Cost of Living** by Arundhati Roy (Flamingo, 1999).

Light should be shed on those who benefit the most from the evils chronicled in such works and who actively block remedial action. Good sources include **Green Backlash: Global Subversion of the Environmental Movement** by Andrew Rowell (Routledge, 1996), **Global Spin: The Corporate Assault on Environmentalism** by Sharon Beder (Green books, 1997) and, with more humour though less environmental awareness, **Downsize This!** by Michael Moore, creator of the TV series *TV Nation*, (Boxtree, 1996).

3. **A Green History of the World** by Clive Ponting (Penguin, 1991).

This is a popular presentation of the ecological view of history, taking the people-environment interaction as the crucial characteristic of any society and the most decisive determinant of its future. In passing, it provides a healthy corrective to 'radical nostalgia' which paints a

romantic picture of indigenous societies and ‘vernacular cultures’. Sadly, environmental destruction and social oppression have long dogged human footsteps.

For an analysis of the last hundred years in particular, see **Something New Under the Sun: An Environmental History of the Twentieth Century** by John McNeil (Allen Lane, 2000). Karl Polanyi’s **The Great Transformation** (Octagon, 1980, originally 1944) provides a lucid analysis of the rise of modern industrial society and the emergence of ‘economic man’. Amongst the intellectual histories, Peter Marshall’s **Nature’s Web: an Exploration of Ecological Thought** (Simon and Shuster, 1992) stands out, though the writings of Clarence Glacken, Roderick Nash, Max Oelschlaeger are all very useful as well.

Follow up by reading works by the growing number of academics who are building an ecological theory of history and historical change. See, for examples, books by writers such as Alfred Crosby, Jared Diamond, Stanley Diamond, Donald Hughes, Marshall Sahlins, Donald Worster, and in a perhaps more popular mode, Farley Mowat. One book stands out, however. It is **Rogue Primate: an Exploration of Human Domestication** by John Livingston (Key Porter Books, 1994), partly a history of human evolution — how it has contributed to the present crisis - and partly the presentation of a non-human-centred philosophy. Amongst other things, it exposes the crude reductionism that blames contemporary woes solely upon capitalism or indeed any cause of a purely economic nature. The works of Paul Shepherd also shed a great deal of light on such matters.

Whilst on the subject of history, there is another area well worth further study. In the past, a small number of very prescient writers saw the destructive road society has long been travelling. They also proposed more ecologically sustainable and less exploitative ways forward. Their writings refute the frequently proffered excuse that past destruction was merely accidental, an excusable misunderstanding, since people didn’t know then what they know now. These visionaries did recognise the follies of their times and courageously said so, often being pilloried for their efforts. Their ranks include Henry Thoreau, George Marsh, John Muir, Fairfield Osborn, William Vogt, Paul Sears, Baker Brownell, Aldo Leopold, Frank Fraser Darling and, last but not least, the great Rachel Carson, who was subject to a particularly vicious witch hunt. All their writings repay close study.

4. **Betrayal of Science and Reason**

by Paul Anne Ehrlich (Island Press, 1998)

A first-class response to the ‘brown backlash’. The latter argues that fears about global warming and other environmental problems are just empty hot air. However, the book also provides a solid guide to the scientific side to green thinking, not least on issues like overpopulation and biodiversity.

For a superb example of an academic textbook on environmental sciences, which also has a lot of good material about sustainable alternatives to despoliation-as-usual, look no further than **Living in the Environment** by G. Tyler Miller (Wadsworth, with new editions appearing on a regular basis). It contains an excellent bibliography as well. **Ecology and Our Endangered Life-Support Systems** by Eugene Odum (Sinauer, 1989) is also a good guide to the scientific side of green politics. Odum is a veteran ecologist who is not afraid to speak out and roundly condemn the havoc being wrought across the planet. Too many scientists seem content to interpret the world (or, rather, smaller and smaller fragments of it) rather than change it for the better. See also **The Diversity of Life** by Edward O. Wilson (Penguin, 1992) and **A Primer**

for **Environmental Literacy** by Frank Golley (Yale, 1998). The need for ‘connected thinking’, see things as a whole, is underlined in **The Web of Life: A New Synthesis of Mind and Matter** by Fritjof Capra (Flamingo, 1997)

5. **Elephant in the Volkswagen: Facing the Tough Questions About Our Crowded Country** by Lindsey Grant et al (Freeman, 1992).

Too many people ignorantly believe that human numbers do not count. This collection of essays, focusing not on countries with exploding populations such as India but on the USA, demonstrates that human population growth is the biggest single source of the Earth’s woe’s and one which multiplies the effects of other malign pressures, not least those from overconsumption and inappropriate technology. In passing, it outlines the ecological approach to specific issues such as immigration and the rising percentage of elderly people.

Follow-up reading should include Paul and Anne Ehrlich’s magisterial analysis **The Population Explosion** (Hutchinson, 1990) as well as the many magazine articles the two, sometimes in partnership with John Holdren, have written on the issue. See also **World War 111: Population and the Biosphere at the End of the Millennium** by Michael Tobias (Continuum, 1998). The personal dimensions to this issue and their links to the ‘big picture’ are well explored in Bill McKibben’s **Maybe One: A Personal and Environmental Argument for Single-child Families** (Simon Shuster, 1998) Excellent material is published regularly in the journal *Population and Environment*, edited by Virginia Abernethy, herself the author of numerous good books on population growth. Other good sources of evidence and argument about the realities of overpopulation include the *Bulletin of the Carrying Capacity Network* (Washington, USA) and *Espérance* (from a coalition of European campaign groups, published in Emmeloord, Netherlands).

6. **Questioning Technology**

edited by John Zerzan Alice Carnes (Freedom Press, 1988).

There are two particularly bad ideas about technology. One is the almost religious faith that technology is the answer, believers thinking that social and environmental problems can be made to disappear simply by waving the magic wand of applied science. The second is the belief that technology is simply a neutral tool, its impacts dependent upon the identity and purposes of its controllers. This anthology is a great introduction to a more critical view, one which pulls no punches when it comes to such false dawns as biotechnology and computerisation Sadly, that great technological pie-in-the-sky, the so-called ‘green car’, is overlooked.

Follow up by reading authors such as Jacques Ellul (**The Technological Bluff**, Erdman, 1990), Neil Postman (try his **Technopoly**, Vintage Books, 1993) and Jerry Mander (especially the first two parts on ‘megatechnology’ in his **In the Absence of the Sacred**, Sierra Club Books, 1992). It is well worth searching out Eugene Schwartz’s **Overskill: The Decline of Technology in Modern Civilisation** (Ballantine, 1971) a much needed antidote to today’s high-tech euphoria. It also includes a careful dissection of the limits of logical empiricism. From an older generation, the writings of Lewis Mumford stand out. All these works demonstrate that ‘alternative’ isn’t necessarily appropriate and that, if a technology is ‘lean’ and ‘clean’, it still might be far from green.

7. **Amusing Ourselves to Death**

by Neil Postman (Methuen, 1986).

Human culture is suffering from a process of degradation, 'dumbing down', that parallels the ruination of environmental systems. Indeed the former is a growing hindrance to any sensitivity towards and understanding of the latter. Postman is a sure-footed guide, focusing in this work on the impact of modern mass media.

For a more general overview see **Dumbing Down: Essays on the Strip-Mining of American Culture** edited by K. Washburn J. Thornton. (Norton, 1997), a collection which concentrates on America but, since 'Americanisation' is a major facet of the process globally, it remains relevant to readers everywhere. Other notable contributors on the issue include Robert Hughes (**The Culture of Complaint**, Harvill, 1994), Richard Sennett (**The Corrosion of Character**, Norton, 1995), Serge Latouche (**Westernization of the World**, Polity Press, 1996), George Ritzer (**The McDonaldization of Society**, Pine Forge press, 1996) Carl Hiaissan (**Team Rodent: How Disney Devours the World**, Ballantine, 1998), John Miller (**Egotopia: Narcissism and the New American Landscape**, Univ. Alabama Pr., 1997).

For more focus on the commercialisation of culture, a good starting point is Naomi Klein (**No Logo: Taking Aim of the Brand Bullies**, Flamingo, 2000). See also writers around the magazines **Adbuster** (Vancouver) and, from Chicago, **The Baffler** (there is a good collection of articles from the latter in **Commodify Your Dissent: The Business of Culture in the New Gilded Age**, edited by T. Frank and M. Weiland, Norton, 1997)

8. **Deep Ecology For The 21st Century: Readings On The Philosophy And Practice Of The New Environmentalism**
edited by George Sessions (Shambhala, 1995).

This is a weighty collection of essays from a variety of writers, with especially valuable introductions to each section by the American philosopher George Sessions. These writings demonstrate that there is a deep crisis in human character and culture, which a crude politics of anti-capitalism or indeed any programme based on economics fails to address and therefore can provide no lasting answers. However, the volume is correspondingly weaker on practical problems, not least the role of market economics and vested interests, and too focused on personal transformation.

It is still worthwhile dipping into **Deep Ecology: Living As If Mattered** by Bill Devall and George Sessions (Gibbs M Smith, 1985). Particularly important is its critique of 'resource managerialism', now often masquerading as environmentalism but, in actuality, but a front for a more sophisticated domination and manipulation of the Earth (as typified by the Brundtland Report, for example). The same applies to that new scam, 'sustainable development'. Other chapters outline other sources of ecological thought, not least from the worldviews of 'primal peoples' and non-western philosophies, something this brief guide has had to ignore.

See also **Ecology, Community and Lifestyle: Outline Of An Ecosophy** by Norwegian Arne Naess, translated and edited by David Rothenberg, (Cambridge University Press, 1991). Naess drew the vital distinction between what he called 'shallow environmentalism' and 'deep ecology', a much more consistent and meaningful sense of solidarity with the Earth. **The Arrogance of Humanism** by David Ehrenfeld (OUP, 1981) remains an essential read, not least for its dissection of the ideology of progress and its offspring 'development'. He is also good at showing how conservation programmes based on a utilitarian ethic are doomed to failure.

The best demolition job on the limits of reductionist and mechanistic thinking can be found in the first part of **Where the Wasteland Ends** by Theodore Roszak (Doubleday, 1973). For a more specific critique of the individualistic and materialistic values that underpin mainstream economic thinking as well as a critique of economic growth policies, try **The Death of Industrial Civilisation** by Joel Jay Kassiola (SUNY Pr., 1990). Modern thinking has also been polluted by much postmodernist rubbish. Its pretensions and foolishness are well and truly buried by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont in their best seller **Intellectual Impostures** (Profile Books, 1997). Sadly, some of their strictures can be applied to much material being produced by the green movement.

Another powerful critique of the dominant worldview is **The Way: An Ecological World-View** by Edward Goldsmith (Green Books, 1996). Drawing upon anthropological evidence from past cultures, he also shows that there is another way of looking at the world, one which will cherish not destroy it. Don't be put off by the rather schematic form of presentation. A very valuable collection of past essays by Goldsmith can be found in **The Great U-Turn: Deindustrialising Society** (Green Books, 1988).

Much wisdom can be found in the pages of **Home Place** by Stan Rowe (NeWest, 1990), who casts a particularly sharp eye over a wide range of scientific, aesthetic and policy issues. A very valuable attempt to bridge 'philosophy' and the formulation of a coherent political platform is **Regarding Nature: Industrialism and Deep Ecology** by Andrew McLaughlin (State University of New York Press, 1993).

9. **A Sand County Almanac: With Essays on Conservation from Round River**
by Aldo Leopold (Oxford University Press, 1987 edition).

Few writer's match Leopold's sensitivity to the meaning and importance of wilderness as well as his awareness of the need to go beyond a human-centered perspective of "resource management" (which has cloaked, indeed legitimised much environmental destruction). He was no armchair sentimentalist, having had extensive experience in forestry and game management. His basic ideas and metaphors, e.g. "thinking like a mountain", and "the Land Ethic", provide solid building blocks for a new worldview at one with the rest of Nature. He also had a way with words that captures the beauty and wonders of our world, though such sensibility can leave one even more in pain at its destruction. Another collection of his writings can be found in **For the Health of the Land** (Island Pr., 1999). See also **The Essential Aldo Leopold** edited by C. Meine and R. Knight (Univ. Wisconsin Pr., 2000)

10. **Naked Emperors: Essays of a Taboo-Stalker**
by Garrett Hardin (Kaufmann, 1982).

Greens need both kind hearts and hard heads. The controversial American biologist Garrett Hardin cuts through a lot of the soft sentiment and piety about relationships between individuals and groups and between people and planet. His paper on the so-called 'tragedy of the commons' remains one of the most cited articles of all time. Few theses contain the potential to upset so many different brands of politics. The disastrous dynamic spotlighted by Hardin undermines the case for, on the one hand, laissez-faire 'market' economics, based on the individual consumer, and, on the other, anarchist and libertarian politics, based on individuals 'doing their own thing'. The 'tragedy' model can be used to show how the former, economic libertarianism, and the latter, social libertarianism, are but different sides of the same bad coin. No wonder the theory has so many enemies. Hardin's critique of the 'cornucopian'

vision of ever-expanding entitlements is particularly forceful. Some of his historical comparisons can be questioned (some traditional commons were actually quite well managed) while his concept of 'lifeboat ethics' in relation to the problems of countries suffering from poverty and environmental decline is also flawed. Nevertheless, Hardin has been a crucial thinker on both environmental and social problems. See also his other collections, notably **Living Within Limits: Ecology, Economics and Population Taboos** (Oxford, 1993)

11. **Blueprint for Survival**

by Edward Goldsmith et al. (Penguin, 1972).

A true oldie but goldie. It still contains the best diagnosis of our mounting social and environmental ills and the best policy framework for curing them. It shows that a coherent green programme cannot be constructed on the basis of 'grievance politics', mixing together the demands from disaffected groups on the edges of society as some radicals have tried to do. Such recipes can only produce dogs' dinners. **The Blueprint** should be the starting point for all those seeking to flesh out the details of a manifesto for sustainability. Its main weakness was a naive faith in the willingness, indeed ability, of governments drawn from mainstream politics to listen to reason. They didn't and they won't. Its other main failing ironically was too much moderation. Things are slip sliding away faster than even this forthright statement anticipated.

12. **Ecology and the Politics of Scarcity**

by William Ophuls (Freeman, 1992)

This contains the best single presentation of the green critique of expansionism. Ophuls also provides a superb explanation of the dynamic of the 'tragedy of the commons'. In particular, it demonstrates how harmful consequences can flow from the cumulative effect of harmless and otherwise well-intentioned decisions. It knocks on the head the soft-headed sentiment that believes that, as one 'green' book put it, "if you care for people, you care for the planet". Sadly, life is a bit more complex. Ophuls should be read by all those who simply blame everything on 'them', be they crooked capitalists or bossy bureaucrats. He also shows how important it is to learn from conservative thinkers such as Edmund Burke, mindless written off as hopeless reactionaries by simple-minded radicals. Follow up with his **Requiem for Modern Politics** (Westview, 1997).

See also **Biosphere Politics** by Jeremy Rifkin (Harper, 1992), a wide-ranging work, with much insight into the downside of the worldview that emerged out of the Enlightenment as well as into specific issues such as genetic engineering. The writings of Christopher Lasch also shed much light both on modern society as a whole (e.g. his **Culture of Narcissism**, Abacus, 1980) and political movements, especially his **Revolt of the Elite and the Betrayal of Democracy** (Norton, 1995) and **The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics** (Norton, 1991)

13. **Let the Mountains Talk, Let the Rivers Run**

by David Brower (Harper, 1996)

There are a number of personal statements by leading activists but few have been so active as Brower or write with such eloquence and force. A really lively and stimulating book, one that really does recharge the batteries of tired campaigners. Mention must be made of Edward Abbey, Wendell Berry and Gary Snyder all of whose writings exude wisdom combined with enthralling way with words.

Abbey wrote some great novels but the place to start is **Desert Solitaire** (Peregrine Smith, 1981), partly based on his experiences as a National Park ranger. He also wrote some great novels, which manage to combine anger and humour.

The best place to start when exploring the many writings of Wendell Berry might be **The Unsettling of America** (Sierra Books, 1982), a demonstration of how to link a critique of a specific aspect of modern society (industrialised agriculture) with broader insights into the values and goals on which it is founded. A number of books have gathered together the many wonderful essays penned by Berry, e.g. **The Gift of Good Land** (North Point Press, 1981), **Standing By Words** (North Point Press, 1983), **Home Economics** (North Point Press, 1987), **What are People For?** (North Point Press, 1990), **Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community** (North Point Press, 1993) and especially **Life is a Miracle: An Essay Against Modern Superstition** (Counterpoint, 2000), a critique of the new ‘determinist’ science, a cult that now attracts many worshippers.

Gary Snyder: Dimensions of a Life edited by Jon Halper (Sierra Club Books, 1991) celebrates one of America’s greatest contemporary thinkers and poets. Snyder’s sensitivity to undomesticated nature gives his work an edge perhaps lacking in Wendell Berry’s works. He too has authored many great books, many of them collections of essays, talks and interviews. The major ones are **Earth Household** (New Directions, 1969) **The Old Ways** (City Light Books, 1977), **Turtle Island** (New Directions, 1974), **The Real Work** (New Directions, 1980), **Axe Handles** (North Point Pr., 1983), **The Practice of the Wild** (North Point Pr., 1990) **Coming into the Watershed** (Pantheon, 1994) and **A Place in Space: Ethics, Aesthetics and Watersheds** (Counterpoint, 1995).

14. **Eco-socialism or eco-capitalism? A critical analysis of humanity's fundamental choices**
by Saral Sarkar (Zed Books, 1999).

Saral Sarkar was born in India in 1936 but since the early 80s has lived in Germany. This background helps him provide extra insights into the global nature of the modern crisis as well as avoid rose-tinted images of the so-called ‘developing’ world. The peoples of those lands are not helpless victims, as portrayed in much radical literature, but often active and willing participants in the process of ‘maldevelopment’. Sarkar cuts through the nonsense of those who think western-style affluence could — or even should — be generalised around the world. He demonstrates that capitalism can never be made green, contrary to the ‘market-based’ solutions (‘natural capitalism’ etc.) being touted by people like Paul Hawken and Amory Lovins. However Sarkar has no illusions about the experiences of the various ‘non-capitalist’ (or, perhaps more aptly, ‘state capitalist’) regimes that emerged from the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. He makes a convincing case for a new kind of socialism, based on solidarity both between people and between people and planet. His vision goes not go beyond a somewhat restrictive utilitarian view of nature. Yet his arguments are vital to the development of a practical programme for an ecological economy.

15. **Steady-State Economics**
by Herman Daly (Freeman, 1977).

The signals sent by conventional economics have been signposts to long-term ruin. For people have done more than Daly to mark out another road, both in theoretical and policy terms. The concept of the steady-state is much misunderstood yet it represents the essence of the green economic alternative. Daly explains why it is so vital and puts forward challenging ideas about

how to institutionalise it. His focus on the *throughput* of energy and raw materials in the human economy dispels a lot of the fog generated by vague words like 'growth' and 'development'. There is, of course, much noise about 'new economics' but most of it fails to go beyond a very pale green Keynesianism. Daly also anticipated reformist policies such as pollution levies and emissions trading, showing that they are the wrong tool applied to the wrong end of the economic process.

See also the works of Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen (especially his magnum opus **The Entropy Law and the Economic Process**, Harvard UP, 1971) and the various writings of E. J. Mishan. Arguments against 'growthmania' are also developed in **The Growth Illusion** by Richard Douthwaite (Green Books, 1992). For a compendium of examples of how 'giantism' (bigger-is-more-beautiful) becomes increasingly counter-productive and unsustainable in all its forms, social, economic and technological, look up **Human Scale** by Kirkpatrick Sale (Secker and Warburg, 1980). The name of Fritz Schumacher is often linked to the phrase 'small is beautiful' but all his writings provide a rich treasure chest of wisdom. Leopold Kohr might be less well known but he too had many insights into the curse of bigness and the need to break up today's megastates.

16. **The Conserver Society: Alternatives for Sustainability** by Ted Trainer (Zed, 1995).

This is the best nuts-and-bolts vision of a sustainable society. It is firmly grounded in the theory of limits-to-growth and the fact that we must all learn to tread more lightly and to share smaller pies as the American writer Tom Bender once put it. Trainer shows that a no-longer-affluent society (in conventional terms) could not only be much safer but also much richer in all kinds of other ways.

The skills of 'living lightly' will partly depend upon an awareness of how heavily we now stamp down on the planet. In this field pioneering work has been done by William Rees and Mathis Wackernagel. See in particular their study of the human 'boot', **Our Ecological Footprint** (New Society Publishers, 1996). A good companion is **Sharing The World** by Michael Carley and Philippe Spapens (Earthscan, 1998)

Case studies of people trying to build such alternatives can be found in a series of short books produced by New Society Publishers, particularly **Turtle Talk: Voices for A Sustainable Future** (edited by Christopher and Judith Plant, 1990), **Putting Power in its Place: Create Community Control** (edited by Christopher and Judith Plant, 1992), and **Futures By Design: The Practice of Ecological Planning** (edited by Doug Aberley, 1994). Richard Douthwaite's **Short Circuit: Strengthening Local Economies for Security in an Unstable World** (Green Books, 1996) and **Sustainable Communities: The Potential for EcoNeighbourhoods**, edited by Hugh Barton (Earthscan, 1999) provide many encouraging case studies and valuable proposals. A book that manages to make the link between core green values and questions of individual lifestyle and public policy is **Simple in Means, Rich in Ends: Practising Deep Ecology** (Green Print, 1990).

The search for a sustainable society will be aided by much more humility about contemporary technological prowess as well as more respect for the achievements of many traditional cultures. A good aid here is Helena Norberg-Hodge's **Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh** (Sierra Club Books, 1991).

17. **Ecological Literacy**

by David Orr (SUNY Pr., 1992)

Any hopes of sustaining a 'conservator society' will depend most of all upon the education of its future citizens. Contrary to the position of many radical critics of contemporary education systems, there will be much prescription in the curriculum we need. Its content is the key issue, with matters such as organisational form, funding and assessment methods significant but nonetheless secondary questions. There is no better guide than David Orr, whose study also has much light to shed on the meaning of 'sustainability'. See also his **Earth in Mind: On Education, Environment and the Human Prospect** (Island Pr., 1994).

Critical Essays on Education and the Recovery of the Ecological Imperative by C. A. Bowers (Teachers College, 1993) provides a first-rate critique of the ecological failure of modern educational theory and practice. It also dissects the fallacy of thinking that a computer on every school desk will improve matters. Another work by Bowers, **Let Them Eat Data: How Computers Affect Education, Cultural Diversity and the Prospects of an Ecologically Sustainable Future** (Univ. Georgia Pr., 2000), broadens and deepens that latter argument.

18. **Green Architecture: Design for a Sustainable Future**

by Brenda and Robert Vale (Thames and Hudson, 1991)

More and more people live in urban environments but the modern megalopolis is as ugly and oppressive as it is unsustainably rapacious in the demands it places on both local and distant ecosystems. However, there is an alternative and this book provides examples as well as draws out the principles on which planning must be based. A number of leading thinkers and practitioners in this field as well as commentators on broader matters are united in **Reshaping the Built Environment: Ecology, Ethics Economics** edited by C. Kilbert (Island Pr., 1999). See also David Pearson's **Earth Spirit** (Gaia books, 1994) and **Living Spaces: Ecological Building and Design** edited by Thomas Schitz-Günther (Könemann, 1999, English edition). The Findhorn Community has produced some good technical material on such matters such as John Talbott's **Simply Build Green**. So has Ecover, the manufacturer of environmentally friendlier cleaners and detergents. See **The Ecological Factory** by Dick Develter (Ecover, 1992).

On broader matters of appropriate technological design, a number of names demand mention. They include John Lyle, Victor Papanek, John and Nancy Todd, David Wann and Sim Van Der Ryn. One of the best statements of why a greener design ethic is needed and of its principles is to be found in an essay **Sharing Smaller Pies** by Tome Bender, a version of which was included in a very useful volume **Resettling America: Energy, Ecology and Community**, edited by Gary Coates whose own contributions are excellent as well (Brick House, 1982). **The Rocky Mountain Institute** (Colorado, USA) and the **Centre for Alternative Technology** (Machynlleth, Wales) are good sources of inspirational ideas in many fields. With specific respect to land use planning, the seminal work remains **Design With Nature** by Ian McHarg (Academic Press, 1969)

19. **Ecoforestry: The Art and Science of Sustainable Forest Use**

edited by Alan Drengson and Duncan Taylor (New Society Publishers, 1997)

Farming and forestry have wrecked the Earth on a far, far greater scale than many traditional protest targets such as hunts, fur farms or new motorways. This book is a case study of how to

put forestry on a more sustainable footing in an approach that firmly recognises the needs of non-human species. It also addresses the social and economic dimensions of the needed revolution in land use. (Drengson's own writings on both ecophilosophy and technology are well worth seeking out)

See also **Forestopia: a Practical Guide to the New Forest Economy** by Michael M'Gonigle and Ben Parfitt (Harbour publishing, 1994). With regard to the production of food and other crops, there are several good books on organic farming and community-supported farms but particularly stimulating are **Forest Farming** by Robert Hart (Green books, 1991) and **New Roots for Agriculture** by Wes Jackson (Univ. Nebraska Pr., 1985) as well as the various writing of Bill Mollison.

20. **Cascadia Wild**

edited by Mitch Friedman and Paul Lindholdt (Frontier Publishing, 1993)

Finally, since sustainability is not just about people, here is a book which points the way to protect remaining wildernesses and ensure habitats for the Earth's other dependants. Their biggest problem is simply that we humans leave less and less space for them. Apart from being an excellent case study (set in the mountains of the north west United States), it is also an introduction to some great writers in the field of wildlife conservation such as Reed Noss and Ed Grumbine.

Other case studies in repairing some of the appalling damage humankind has inflicted on Mother earth can be found in **Helping Nature Heal: an Introduction to Environmental Restoration** edited by Richard Nilsen (Ten Speed Press, 1991) and **In the Service of the Wild: Restoring and Reinhabiting Damaged Land** by Stephanie Mills (Beacon, 1995). See also **Saving Nature's Legacy** by Reed Noss and Allan Cooperrider (Island Press, 1994) and **The Wildlands Project**, a special issue of the excellent American magazine *Wild Earth* 1992.

Rogue's Gallery

Fairness demands mention of the other side. Out of this world they might be but sadly their words command more attention than the authors listed above. It might pay to hear what they have to say and mastering their arguments. The ranks of corporate apologists, economic boomsters, snake oil sellers, technofreaks and cornucopian fantasists are numerous but past and present prominent figures include Herman Kahn, Julian Simons, Wilfred Beckerman, Matt Ridley, Martin Lewis, Dixie Lee Ray, and Rush Limbaugh. Not surprisingly there is the odd environmental turncoat making a good career out of denunciations of his former beliefs. Richard North is but one example while the writings of Michael Allaby illustrate how fast some people can cover their previous tracks. For a sample of truly off-the-wall technophilia, try Donna Haraway or Sadie Plant, plus the magazine *Wired*.

Afterthoughts

The limited list of core reading above unfortunately means the omission of many good writers on green issues. Some of the best have focused on specific issues and therefore do not figure in a more broad-ranging bibliography like the one above. Others have tended to write shorter pieces that either appear in collections or journals. The same is true of pamphlets, some of which are classics in their own right.

One way to identify such works is to use the British Lending Library catalogue of books in print, on-line journal citation indexes, and a commercial websites like Amazon or Waterstones as well as publishers' catalogues. Often the entry of keywords and phrases like biodiversity, bioregionalism, and biotechnology will spotlight good material. It is important to use a variety of terms such as 'bioagriculture', 'ecoagriculture', 'ecofarming', 'organic farming' and 'permaculture' since different ones tend to be used from one time or place to another.

Finally, do not keep these books to yourself. Lend them to others. Even better, persuade your local library to stock them. Encourage booksellers to include more green books on their shelves. Get academics to 'ecologise' their reading lists. Spread the green word!

Please feel free to copy this guide and otherwise circulate it, though an acknowledgement would be appreciated.

Correspondence to:

Sandy Irvine, 45, Woodbine Road, Gosforth, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE3 1DE, England.

e-mail: sandyirvine@blueyonder.co.uk

[Other Ecocentric Texts](#)