

a small book that packs a big punch

MARY-LOU O'KENNEDY**The Little Earth Book**

James Bruges

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The Little Earth Book is certainly little-it is the size of a CD case-but its message is powerful and very thought provoking. It consists of fifty chapters on as many topics. Each is between two and four pages long and imparts condensed information and an evocative message on an aspect of the environment the economy or the life sciences. Anyone who wishes to follow up any of these topics can then turn to the rich reference guide.

The early chapters emphasise the importance of approaching sustainability systematically by respecting four key principles:

- We must not extract more toxic minerals from the Earth than can be safely contained or reabsorbed;
- We must not allow any new, stable and persistent molecules we make to increase in nature; We must not diminish the world's life-support system by disrupting its natural cycles; and
- We must recognise that all people in the world need the benefits of nature-equally.

These rules of sustainability are set by nature, not by man, the book emphatically states.

The author then presents several chapters each offering startling examples of the damage done to natural systems in the name of economic growth and 'progress'. Again and again the reader is struck by the extent to which human activity has arrogantly and irresponsibly disregarded nature. For example, in the last thirty years human activity has destroyed a third of the planet's natural wealth. The global freshwater fish catch was 45% lower in 1995 than in 1970. Cod are now on the Endangered Species list. Reading these, one is left with a solid understanding of the interconnectedness of our world and, more importantly, of the means of achieving its sustainability.

Westerners cannot but feel shame for the indulgent abuse our system has perpetrated on the global environment and the disastrous consequences that this has had in the form of climate change, pollution, poverty and hunger. The real shame, however, comes from knowing that through organisations like the World Bank, the IMF, the World Trade Organisation and the United Nations we had the power to put things right but chose not to do so.

Little Earth discusses a number of ways in which things could be improved now, such as the cancellation of Third World debt and the control of greenhouse gas emissions by trading in pollution quotas. It also explores proposals developed by economists and activists for reforming economics so that the transition from growth economics to sustainable economics might be made.

Bruges' message about the problems facing the global community is uncompromising. He believes it needs to respond to three threats with unprecedented urgency. These are climate change, genetically modified organisms and persistent organic pollutants, all of which are discussed by him throughout the book. He keeps the issue of action foremost in one's mind but, although he highlights the need for participative structures and decision-making, many of the actions he discusses have to be taken on a national and international stage. I suggest his next book should explore the positive actions which individuals and communities can involve themselves in to help bring sustainability about.

Bruges believes that scientists have a special responsibility 'to widen their imagination to encompass the interconnectedness of all life' and to 'work out how we can share the world without harm to its other creatures'. However, he calls upon us all to consider how we can achieve 'a stable and sustainable economy for all humanity'.

Little Earth provides a broad, very accessible overview for anyone seeking to understand current issues concerning ecology, the environment, climate change, world debt, genetic engineering etc. It is an invaluable handbook on questions of sustainability. And, while it frequently makes points with which some people will disagree or argue, it will certainly stimulate readers to react urgently. They can scarcely fail to do so when presented with its snapshots of the many interrelated factors destroying our world at such an alarming rate.

Mary-Lou O'Kennedy is a member of the Feasta Committee. She is manager of the County Wexford Partnership, a local development company which addresses social exclusion and marginalisation in County Wexford. She is currently working with the Partnership and local community groups to create a 'model' for the development of sustainable rural communities.



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