

## “Sustainability: A New Supernova”

**Landmarks for Sustainability:  
Events and Initiatives That Have Changed Our World**  
(Sheffield, UK: Greenleaf, 2009)

By  
**Wayne Visser**

A review by William C. Frederick, October 2009.

**supernova:** *an explosive brightening of a star where the energy radiated by it increases by a factor of  $10^{10}$ , taking several years to fade and dominating the whole galaxy in which it lies. It occurs when a star has burnt up all its available nuclear fuel and the core collapses catastrophically.*

-- Oxford Dictionary of Science

This book—informative, authoritative, reliable—provides a penetrating glance directly into the central core of one of today’s most exciting supernova-like phenomena: the brilliant illuminating flash of **Sustainability**, following the virtual and continuing collapse of conventional ways of conducting business and caring for the planet Earth.

Author Wayne Visser—*Making a Difference* and *The A to Z of Corporate Social Responsibility* [reviewed elsewhere on this website]; founder and CEO of CSR International—is speaking on behalf of the University of Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership, whose research program he previously directed. The Cambridge program works with leaders in business, government, and civil society to heighten awareness of global transformational change.

Here is what you will find in *Landmarks for Sustainability*: Twenty prominent indicators of the sustainability movement classified broadly as Global Challenges and Global Responses. Two or more examples are given for each Landmark, e.g., WWF Living Planet Index, Kyoto Protocol, Exxon Valdez, UN Global Compact, Grameen Bank, BOP, ISO 14001, etc.

### THE GLOBAL CHALLENGES

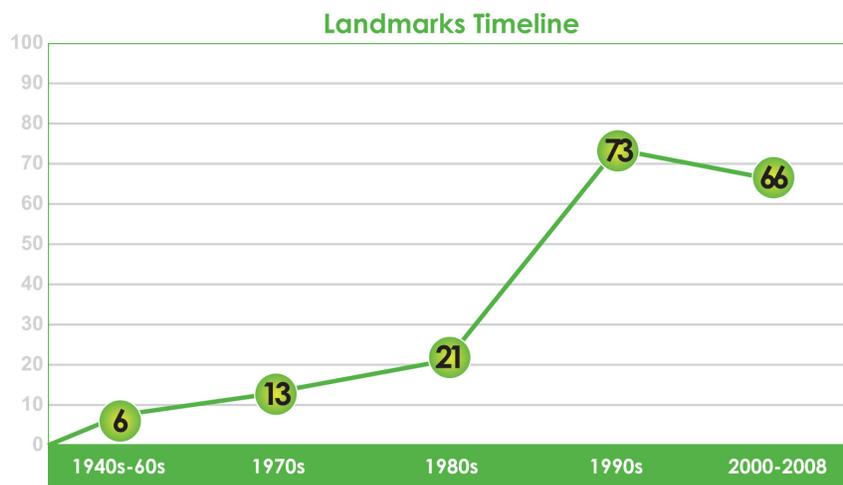
- **State of the planet**
- **Crisis events**
- **Climate change**
- **Health and safety**
- **Globalization and its critics**
- **Poverty and development**
- **Human rights**
- **Corruption and transparency**

## THE GLOBAL RESPONSES

- **World summits**
- **Business associations**
- **Leadership initiatives**
- **Social enterprise**
- **Industry initiatives**
- **Financial initiatives**
- **Sustainable investment**
- **Sustainable consumerism**
- **Codes and standards**
- **Corporate governance**
- **Sustainability reporting**
- **Stakeholder engagement**

A brief 8-page chapter neatly summarizes each global indicator, gives prominent examples, quotes authorities, provides graphic photos and statistical displays, and includes authoritative pro-and-con bibliographies and website addresses. You will find many familiar faces here: Kofi Annan, Bill Gates, Enron's Ken Lay, executed Nigerian activist Ken Saro-Wiwa, Mary Robinson, Muhammad Yunus, Eleanor Roosevelt, Nelson Mandela—and some unknowns, including the faces of child workers, police-brutalized globalization protesters, desecrated landscapes, and female sweatshop laborers. Each of these capsule accounts is a small treasure beautifully packed with solid information and human drama. The publisher—Greenleaf Publishing, Ltd.—deserves a big pat on the back for the book's artistry and compact design.

One of the most useful features is a Landmarks Timeline that records the yearly and multiple appearances of the Sustainability Landmarks. When graphically rendered, it reveals the explosive growth of the Sustainability supernova—a 12-fold increase since the 1940s-60s. Indeed, the Timeline data comprise a virtual Periodic Table of sustainability's 20 common elements.



By combining the individual Landmark themes into functionally similar categories (my analysis, not the author's), one can see just where the major emphasis has been in developing an operational meaning of sustainability efforts. Globalization skeptics, please note the significant numbers and percentages of business and financial activism.

---

<u>LANDMARK THEMES</u>	<u>NUMBER OF OCCURENCES</u>	<u>PERCENT</u>
Ecosystem Health	[30]	16
	+ = 58	31
Planetary Dimensions	[28]	15
Codes and Standards	56	29
Positive Business Response	[29]	15
	+ = 49	25
Capital Investment Principles	[20]	10
Poverty Alleviation	28	15

---

As Polly Cortice, Director of the Cambridge Programme, points out, sustainability has shifted from marginal status to mainstream thinking, from general ideals to specific actions, from reactive to proactive business response, from cross-sector actions to detailed industry-sector responses, and to growing consensus on global principles and standards.

Lurking behind and driving these remarkable changes may be an even more radical, though subtle, shift of executive mindset. Clearly, Sustainability now incorporates a set of multi-actor meanings and global responsibilities going well beyond mere stewardship of Planet Earth's natural ecosystems. It includes what has traditionally been labeled **Corporate** Social Responsibility and **Corporate** Citizenship, with emphasis on the business firm's social responsibilities and citizenship obligations. Does this expanded meaning of Sustainability not imply a broader community-inclusive responsibility than one centered exclusively on the corporation and its misdeeds? Is not Sustainability about **socio-ecological stewardship** writ large across **all** groups, **all** institutions, **all** nations, **all** people everywhere? That is equivalent to saying, Don't blame the business corporation alone for all of the planet's sustainability woes.

So, who can use this book? A marvelous handbook for executives. It slips compactly into student backpacks. A savior for faculty looking for quick examples to squeeze into a lecture. A delight for website geeks and bloggers international. A jewel for libraries.

Remembering that a supernova occurs when a star's core collapses catastrophically, it may be a tad early to say that our economic star—the profit-and-power-seeking corporation—

is anywhere near such a collapse, although perhaps its foundations are shaking a bit. Nevertheless, *Landmarks for Sustainability* holds out the promise glimpsed through Wayne Visser's Hubble-like deep-space probe that a brilliant flash—a Sustainability Supernova—is on the way. The book's frontispiece quotation hints at what it will take to affect life on Planet Earth:

*It is not the strongest of the species that survives,  
nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one  
that is the most adaptable to change.*

---Charles Darwin