

“If You Don’t Have Time to Read Books . . .”

The Top 50 Sustainability Books
(Sheffield: Greenleaf Publishing, Ltd., 2009)

Presented by
The University of Cambridge Programme for Sustainability Leadership
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A Review by William C. Frederick©
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“. . . but want to know what the good ones say”, then you should take a look at this splendid array of best sellers about sustainability and related issues. As books go, it’s quite unique because you get 50 for the price of one—and in a compact package of 250+ pages. Do the math—that’s 5 pages per book. Students—and let’s admit it, their teachers, too—will love the shortcut.

For each one of the Top 50 books, author Wayne Visser gives you key ideas, a one-page synopsis, illustrative quotations, author bio, follow-up interviews with most authors, and citations to related books and website listings. So armed, you can bluff your way through any social gathering (or student classroom) as if you had read the whole thing.

Books are treated chronologically, beginning in 1949 with Aldo Leopold’s powerful case for land conservation, *A Sand County Almanac*, followed by the better known *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson’s 1962 classic about the dangers of DDT pesticide use. Toward the end are two books about climate change: Al Gore’s *An Inconvenient Truth* and *The Economics of Climate Change* by the UK’s Nicholas Stern as No. 50. In between are many examples illustrating the pro and con public dialogue about preserving the Earth’s ecosystems seen as under siege by mindless, reckless, greedy corporations pursuing profits at all costs. All 50 titles are listed in an appendix to this review.

Reading through from front to back carries you along enjoyably and informatively on the emerging currents of thought generated by business leaders, corporate consultants, academic experts, NGO critics of corporate behavior, and—perhaps most intriguingly as a harbinger of future thinking—a few bioethicists and ecosystem specialists who draw directly on natural processes for making sustainability stick. Taking this journey from the 1940s through the early years of the 21st century is well worth the trip.

Sustainability Plus

It doesn’t take long to see that *The Top 50* is about more than sustainability, and that the voices originate from various locales around the world. Being curious, I grouped the 50 books according to their central message and their authors’ continental origin, with these rather revealing results: (some overlap of categories and joint authorship)

Central Focus	Number/Percent of Books	
Ecology/sustainability:	21	35%
Anti-corporate/free-market critique:	13	22%
Pro-corporate/capitalism:	9	15%

Scientific/Philosophic critique: 17 28%
 Clearly, the struggle for sustainability is believed to be as much about the nature and ultimate function of corporate enterprise as about the nature and stability of ecosystems.

Continent/Country of Origin of Author(s)		
USA	25	44%
Europe	23	40%
Other:	9	16%
Asia	4	0.07%
Latin America	3	0.05%
Canada	2	0.04%

So the Top 50 sustainability agenda is predominantly a Euro-American chorus of complaints and pleadings about the greater need for ecological governance.

However, those country/continental views differ on what specific focus bothers them the most. The most persistent voices favoring *sustainability policies* are European at 57% contrasted with 43% USA authors. *Anti-corporate/anti-free market* viewpoints were registered mainly as American (54%), followed by Europe (23%), Canada (15%), and Asia (7%), which may reveal that being up-close to the corporate beast generates the most heat. On the contrary, the *pro-corporate/pro-capitalist* opinions were mainly expressed by Europeans (44%), Latin Americans (44%), and Asians (22%), a surprising result given the corporate exploitation so frequently found especially in lesser-developed regions of Latin America and Asia. Some authors—more than a quarter of the 50—took a *scientific/philosophic* view of ecology/sustainability, often interesting but not always obviously relevant to the topic at hand.

Sustainability Minus

One more point about authorship is worth noting. Whose sustainability voice is absent or weakly represented? Here are the absentees: major stakeholder groups such as labor, consumers, suppliers, SMEs, indigenous populations, conflict-zone refugees, slum dwellers, the rural poor, and various other marginal groups who have a direct stake in sustainability's success or failure. Others barely heard: government and legal viewpoints (only 3), NGOs (4), women authors (10 out of 62), even corporate consultant-types who might have been expected to advertise themselves (4). Also missing are perspectives from perhaps the two most vulnerable continents—Africa and Australia. Such glaring omissions cause me to wonder—Huh?! Did someone hit the Delete button? What's going on? Shouldn't we be hearing *global* voices, not just a favored few? What does "Top 50" mean, anyway? Top to whom? And for what purpose? It makes one ask: How were the choices made?

Methodology Askew

Tapping the opinions of any group can be tricky business, as any statistician or public-opinion pollster will confirm. The director of Cambridge University's Programme for Sustainability Leadership, Polly Courtice, says the Top 50 Book "is based on a poll

among senior leaders represented by CPSL’s alumni of more than 3,000 people.” Well, OK, but how was the poll conducted? Where is the survey form? What did it ask of respondents? And what was the response rate? Did the Cambridge poll send out a suggestive list of books, or did it rely on spontaneous, unguided choices by those polled? Does the “Top 50” list reflect the Cambridge Programme’s sustainability agenda as much as, or more than, the freely expressed opinions of its executive alums? Such concerns could have been avoided had greater attention been given, or clearer explanations provided, regarding the need for an objective polling technique. I doubt this is a failing of author Wayne Visser, who is listed rather unobtrusively not on the title page but on the publisher and copyright page as having written the text. And while I’m at it, an index would have been a helpful addition.

Following the book’s release, the publisher apparently got some static from readers about how the books actually ranked in popularity, not just when they were published. A subsequent web posting from Greenleaf ranks the top 20 books by votes counted (see Appendix B, below). But we still don’t know how many votes were cast or how they were solicited from a still unknown number of respondents.

A Worthwhile Book

The Top 50 is overall a good read. Work your way through it from beginning to end, thereby capturing the growing awareness of 50+ leading thinkers about unfolding planetary ecosystem disasters in the making. Without doubt, the collective power of giant corporations just may be the key to resolving, or at least lessening, the most monstrous impacts and human tragedies envisioned by futurist thinkers.

But remember, beyond these valuable perspectives, you should also seek out the plethora of newly-emerging research about what might be done by the major players to confront and grapple with the entire sustainability agenda.

Appendix A The Top 50 Listed Chronologically

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| 1 A Sand County Almanac (1949) | 26 Factor Four (1998) |
| 2 Silent Spring (1962) | 27 False Dawn (1998) |
| 3 Unsafe At Any Speed (1965) | 28 Development as Freedom (1999) |
| 4 The Population Bomb (1968) | 29 No Logo (1999) |
| 5 Operating Manual for Spaceship Earth (1969) | 30 Natural Capitalism (1999) |
| 6 The Limits to Growth (1972) | 31 Business as Unusual (2000) |
| 7 Small is Beautiful (1973) | 32 The Mystery of Capital (2000) |
| 8 Gaia (1979) | 33 The Civil Corporation (2001) |
| 9 The Turning Point (1982) | 34 Fast Food Nation (2001) |
| 10 Our Common Future (1987) | 35 The Skeptical Environmentalist (2001) |
| 11 The Dream of the Earth (1988) | 36 Cradle to Cradle (2002) |
| 12 A Fate Worse Than Debt (1988) | 37 Globalization and Its Discontents (2002) |
| 13 Staying Alive (1989) | 38 The Corporation (2004) |
| 14 Blueprint for a Green Economy (1989) | 39 Presence (2004) |
| 15 For the Common Good (1989) | 40 The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid (2004) |
| 16 Human Scale Development (1989) | 41 The River Runs Black (2004) |
| 17 Changing Course (1992) | 42 Capitalism as if the World Matters (2005) |
| 18 The Ecology of Commerce (1993) | 43 Capitalism at the Crossroads (2005) |
| 19 Maverick (1993) | 44 Collapse (2005) |
| 20 When Corporations Rule the World (1995) | 45 The End of Poverty (2006) |
| 21 Biomimicry (1997) | 46 The Chaos Point (2006) |
| 22 Cannibals with Forks (1997) | 47 Heat (2006) |
| 23 The Hungry Spirit (1997) | 48 An Inconvenient Truth (2006) |
| 24 Banker to the Poor (1998) | 49 When the Rivers Run Dry (2006) |

25 The Crisis of Global Capitalism (1998)

50 The Economics of Climate Change (2007)

Appendix B
The Top 20 Listed by Votes Cast

1 An Inconvenient Truth

2 Silent Spring

3 The Economics of Climate Change

4 Small is Beautiful

5 Capitalism as if the World Matters

6 Collapse

7 Natural Capitalism

8 Gaia

9 Our Common Future

10 Cannibals with Forks

11 The Limits to Growth

12 Cradle to Cradle

13 The Fortune at the Bottom of the Pyramid

14 The End of Poverty

15 Heat

16 Biomimicry

17 The Ecology of Commerce

18 Banker to the Poor

19 The Turning Point

20 Development as Freedom