

Sustainability Strategy. Paul Martin and Miriam Verbeek, Sydney, NSW, The Federation Press, 2006

The global socio-ecological crisis we face in the twenty-first century has been well described in many contemporary works. The harder question of how we get out of our present quagmire to create a more sustainable future is more complex to answer. The problem, as you know, lies in our present suite of social, political and economic arrangements, which do not reward the conservation of natural resources, but instead actively reward the untrammelled, and often, unthinking, consumption of resources.

The Federation Press is publishing a series of books on environmental and sustainability issues in Australia. *Sustainability Strategy* by Paul Martin and Miriam Verbeek is a practical guide to achieving sustainability in the public sector, business and natural resource management. This book is not directed towards an education readership. Rather, this book examines a number of resource management approaches that hold promise for improving institutional sustainability. Having said this, many of the systemic impediments environmental educators commonly encounter are explained from the very first page. And the strategies explored throughout the book are transferable to teachers who work in education institutions. Therein lies the value of this book. We are all consumers of natural resources.

Social change is inherently political and cumbersome. Much that has been written about sustainability is advocacy of a particular position or of certain policy instruments - such as use of market or governmental regulation. Martin and Verbeek are very comfortable with ambiguity and with creatively responding to contextual situations. They are strong advocates of learning. They do not prescribe a single solution, or argue the rightness of any one instrument or policy but describe a number of workable strategies people can take to move things forward in different circumstances.

The benefits of strategic thinking, entrepreneurial spirit and innovation are continually emphasised. I did enjoy reading a text extolling the virtues of thinking. The authors' argue effective strategies for managing change must minimise the costs, reduce social inequity and yet proceed fast enough to avoid "hitting too many physical limits to our ability to harvest what we need from the Earth" (p. 18). Change has to happen because eventually the future will catch up with us. The longer we delay taking necessary action towards reshaping our institutions, the greater the likelihood that "later adjustments will have to be more radical and there will be less time for innovation and adaptation" (p. 2).

In systematically detailing the institutional arrangements that impede and need to change, the authors argue "the problem is not an insufficiency of possible solutions; it is a failure of society to change to meet even the clearly identified challenges" (p. 23). Exciting sustainability work "has not been efficiently supported" (p. 23). A major impediment towards a creating a sustainable Australia is that present resource conserving frameworks are "sometimes irrational, poorly designed and inefficiently administered when compared with the infrastructure supporting wealth production" (p. 5).

The job of the "sustainability strategist" (a new term for the lexicon) is to construct a strategy based upon a realistic assessment of the context and money and people available to make change work. Martin and Verbeek discuss research showing how conventional educational awareness and social marketing programs are often flawed and rarely result in behavioural change. Information provision alone seems to be a very

weak tool for sustainability. Educational programs need to be supported by other tools to ensure personal commitment and practical action. For example, information about saving water may not reduce a person's actual water usage. But an education program that also provides water saving showerheads and taps fixtures to families along with a governmental regulatory system that actively monitors water usage in neighbourhoods will reduce domestic consumption.

Interviews from experienced people working in different sectors of the economy are presented throughout the book. Dr Jodi Smith who comments on education notes that the methods educators use "are effective in raising awareness but not in obtaining behaviour change" (p. 200). Smith sees sustainability not as an end point to reach, but as a journey. The end points will continue to shift over time as our technologies and capabilities improve. Best practice in any organization is when management and staff are doing as much as possible at any point in time while also researching and learning how to improve further.

Martin and Verbeek have structured their discussions by first arguing we need to face up to institutional reform. In Part One, the concepts of a sustainable society that doesn't engage in headlong destruction of natural capital are set out. The possibilities for achieving behavioural change are then discussed. The authors are deeply worried Australians are being led astray in that we are not receiving accurate information, or signals, about the sorry state of natural resource depletion. In fact, we are actively prevented from discerning the information on which we could make informed decisions about resource conservation because the signals that "support the culture of consumption are very strong" (p. 40). The media tend to overstate "the relatively few signals that science and technology will solve environmental problems" and that we are "happy to elevate these signals beyond their worth" (p. 40).

In Part Two, the authors discuss strategies for resource management change such as market forces, rights markets, property rights, private and public regulation as factors influencing sustainable use of resources. They argue the private market has as much to offer as government in terms of innovating change. In Part Three, the authors make the case that the social, economic, cultural costs and benefits from any change need to be taken into account on equity grounds. Conservation initiatives can have unpredicted effects. The "triple bottom line goals of sustainability, wealth and fairness" (p. 211) cannot be achieved within present paradigms of resource use or resource governance. It is "Pollyanna-ish" (p. 212) to believe we can keep our present institutional arrangements intact and somehow achieve sustainable outcomes. The last chapter sets out concepts and procedures for "setting up a strategy team" that will work effectively together to achieve long-term goals. The importance of talking to people and learning within communities is strongly emphasised. So is the necessity for gathering extensive and reliable information.

Does a text written for natural resource managers have application to the work of educators? The short answer is a qualified yes. Many of the scenarios and strategies described resonate within education practice. The authors carefully explain important concepts through an instrumentalist lens, though many of these may not be of interest to all educators. The writing is informative, if never sparkling, and there are several key messages to take away. We really don't know how to move forward in all situations, we have to learn as we go. The contribution Martin and Verbeek make in this book is to signpost some promising pathways.

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