

Sustainable Global Communities in the Information Age, edited by Kaoru Yamaguchi, Westport, CT: Praeger, 1997, 218 pp.

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The thesis advanced by the editor of this collection is that because the information age is radically different from the industrial age, a new socioeconomic system is needed that is sustainable, community based, and can accommodate and use new information technology. Twenty three contributors and 20 chapters later, the reader has been informed of why the cognitive revolution in psychology is important, what future-oriented projects UNESCO has taken on recently (in what seems like a three and one-half page infomercial), how the spinning wheel and pit loom can revitalize communities in India, and where a proposed futures-focused university to be called The Network University of the Green World should be located (answer: on a small island in Japan).

The book is challenging to read. Futures studies combines research, assessment, and policy making as it pulls from a wide range of academic disciplines, including sociology, political science, and economics. This complexity places difficult organizational demands on any attempt at a multiple-author treatment of topics. Sustainable Global Communities is in places informative and provocative, but more noticeably, it is distractingly inconsistent and insufficiently focused. Synthesis could have been enhanced greatly by weeding out the relatively less pertinent essays and by adding transitions between chapters, or at least between sections. Without such integration, key points are made outside the frame of any discernible narrative, which weakens the central argument.

One source of these difficulties is revealed in the preface, in which the editor describes how the contributions were originally presented at a 1993 seminar held on the Japanese island of Awaji, which he acknowledges dates the material considerably. The book is little more than a compilation of these various presentations, some of which have been updated for publication. A light editorial hand results in duplication of background material, and a less well-developed context for absorbing these presentations in their written form than one would normally receive from the give and take of an intimate and rustic seminar setting.

The material is presented in four sections, "Environmental Issues and Futures Studies" (four chapters), "New Framework of Community Economy" (three chapters), "Building Sustainable Communities Globally" (ten chapters), and "Sustainable Community Projects in Awaji Island" (three chapters). I will mention those essays which in my judgment contribute most centrally to the theme of the project or otherwise invite recognition.

Jerome Karle's brief overview of the present health of the planet stresses the importance of "quality of life" as a critical factor in assessments and decisions made regarding the environment, technology, and sustainability. He refers to population control, sustainability, and proper human behavior as "indispensables" that must be managed responsibly and over the long term in any attempt to attain widespread improvement in living conditions.

Sustainability is the focus of Kaoru Yamaguchi's chapter, of which the first eight pages are dense with formulas and are perhaps of most interest to trained economists. His thesis is that "the capitalist market economy is a fatally distorted system in the sense that it cannot appreciate the most important values for a better life and sustainable development, such as labour value, information value and ecological value." Yamaguchi advocates instead what he calls a "MuRatopian economy" based on "information-sharing networks," "self-management and participatory democracy," and "sustainable development." His discussion is intriguing, but his claim that "the MuRatopian economy is a system superior to the capitalist market economy" is grounded in little more than conjecture.

One example of a component of the system described by Yamaguchi is the "Community Land Trust," which is the topic of the five-page essay by Matthei and LaFontaine. A "Community Land Trust" is a "democratically structured, community-based, non-profit corporation" that is both publicly and privately owned, and which the authors argue meets both immediate and future housing needs within an economic model that supports the health of communities. They also point out that although Community Land Trusts face many challenges such as over-professionalization and undue dependency on sources of financing, these communities are flourishing in the United States.

A more radical alternative perspective on alternative communities is laid out in Brian Tokar's informative and well-written treatment of what he calls the environmental justice movement, radical wilderness activism, bioregionalism, and Green politics. Tokar criticizes "leading US environmental organizations" for "compromising away the tremendous visionary potential of ecological thought" by focusing on short-term policy goals "within the limits of existing political and economic institutions." Instead, he challenges citizens to imagine possibilities for resource management outside the influence of huge organizations and international agencies and to consider decentralized, local approaches to community building and environmental policies. Tokar also proposes that new communication technologies be employed openly and cooperatively in the service of exchanging ideas and information between and within communities, in contrast to the thread of technophobia woven through many of the other essays.

Information technology also has a place in Qin Linzheng's discussion of rural community development in China. He explains how farmers in remote areas "are beginning to understand the place and role of information for decision making in production, management and administration." Developments in information technology and information management are just one part of what Linzheng sees as the need for extensive economic reforms based on the socialist market economy. He argues that citizens of rural communities should govern themselves so that they can make quick and informed decisions about which markets to enter and how to conduct activities. Additional hurdles to sustainable community development in rural China include wide disparities in income, overpopulation, rising crime rates, and environmental disasters both natural and human generated.

In his treatment of sustainability in the Philippines, Cesar Villanueva begins by distinguishing between sustainable development and sustainable communities. The latter concept, he suggests, puts focus on the local level and facilitates the analysis of specific present conditions and the generation of specific proposals for reform. Villanueva emphasizes that community development and sustainable community can be compatible only if critical issues of equity, environment and development are addressed. Huge gaps in income result in crippling disparities in access to natural resources. Strategies for dealing with environmental degradation must be engineered at the community level, which should

positively impact property rights reforms. “Sociocultural, economic, political and spiritual” development should be better rather than more.

Finally, Stevenson, Burkett and San Myint discuss how what they call “integrated communications and information technology” such as digital video applications can expedite connections between local communities on a global scale and encourage decentralization. They provide the example of the Local/Global Netweaving Program in Australia, founded on the principles of connection between local and global communities, participation in both local and global activities, communication, and practical action. Importantly, the authors stress that interactive information technology must be supported by a framework of use in line with values that recognize equality of persons “irrespective of economic background, race, gender, geography, or other characteristics.” The alternative, they insist, is a future in which machines shape and control societies.

This scattered and uneven collection of essays will be most useful for nonspecialist readers interested in examples of local approaches to sustainable community development. The importance of quality of life in notions of sustainability, the effectiveness of community-level governance, and Community Land Trusts as an alternative to wholly public or private home ownership are particularly memorable topics. Although it is not well suited for the classroom or as an academic resource, the casual reader by judiciously skipping about with an interest in the issues likely will become better informed and possibly inspired to investigate further.

Earth’s Insights: A Multicultural Survey of Ecological Ethics from the Mediterranean Basin to the Australian Outback by J. Baird Callicott, with a Foreword by Tom Hayden (1997) Berkeley : University of California Press, 285 pp.

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Earth’s Insights covers some challenging terrain in the field of comparative environmental ethics, a field too little explored by scholars. Callicott, professor of philosophy and religious studies at the University of North Texas, constructs for us a framework for the comparative study of ethics and environmental values, and for examining the susceptibility of both to historical change. Implicit in this tour is a notion that we might turn to non-Western sources of inspiration to chart a course for a more sustainable future.

The first question Callicott poses is: What is the equivalent of “ethics” in traditional non-Western societies? As he acknowledges, ethics do not exist in a vacuum, hermetically sealed off from larger systems of ideas (or, for that matter, from the rough-and-tumble of the real world). Ethics must be viewed, instead, like any other spheres of human thought and action (science, technology or law) in a broad frame of differences--of problems perceived and solutions attempted--by peoples of different places and times, in different