

Cambridge Top 40 Sustainability Books of 2010

By Wayne Visser

Part 1 (20 April 2011)

In 2009, I worked on a project for the University of Cambridge Programme for Sustainability (CPSL) which resulted in the publication of *The Top 50 Sustainability Books*[1]. The book draws together some of the best thinking over the last 50 years and more on the most pressing social and environmental challenges we face as a society.

For The State of Sustainability Leadership Report 2011 just published by the University of Cambridge Programme for Sustainability, I took a fresh new look at books, this time focusing on 2010. The Cambridge Top 40 Sustainability Books of 2010 list was compiled by CPSL with input from its Senior Associates. We selected those books which we believe are most relevant for today's leaders. Comparing this list to our Top 50 books, we can observe a number of changes:

- The 'All Time Top 50' list included a fairly balanced coverage of social and environmental issues. By contrast the '2010 Top 40' list is heavily skewed towards environmental challenges, and dominated by climate change.
- The Top 50 contained numerous treatise on capitalism and globalisation, while the Top 40 (in the wake of the financial crisis) has shifted almost exclusively to a focus on the economy.
- The Top 40 also has a much stronger emphasis on business responses and creating change. In fact, it is altogether a more pragmatic list, with titles that contain words like 'plan', 'how to', 'strategy' and 'guide'. This shift to action-orientation is a positive development, as is the increase in the number of female authors (28%, as compared with 17% for the Top 50), although the gender imbalance remains worryingly low.

Among the books on our Top 40 list that have been creating a real buzz are Tim Jackson's *Prosperity Without Growth*, Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett's *The Spirit Level* and The Prince of Wales's *Harmony*. Jackson's book revives a much older debate about 'economics for a finite planet', led since the 1970s by the likes of former World Bank economist Herman Daly (*Steady State Economics* and *Beyond Growth*). Jackson restates the challenge starkly: "Questioning growth is deemed to be the act of lunatics, idealists and revolutionaries. But question it we must." While others like Jonathon Porritt (in *Capitalism as if the World Matters*) argue for 'smart growth' instead of 'dumb growth', the global financial crisis has given Jackson's more uncompromising zero-growth position a renewed resonance.

Wilkinson and Pickett's *The Spirit Level*, subtitled 'Why More Equal Societies Always Do Better', is a highly complementary companion to Jackson's book. Using a plethora of data and analysis, the authors build a case that countries should focus on equity rather than growth in order to create healthy societies. In countries of equal overall wealth, argue Wilkinson and Pickett, less equal societies suffer more social ills - shorter, unhealthier and unhappier lives; higher rates of teenage pregnancy, violence, obesity, imprisonment and addiction; poorer relationships between socio-economic classes; and higher environmental impacts through resource consumption. The book has created some controversy, and some dispute the authors' arguments. Nevertheless, its message is timely and urgent.

Harmony is an entirely different book, which looks at social and ecological problems through a more aesthetic and philosophical lens. The Prince of Wales, together with Tony Juniper & Ian Skelly, range far and wide across the intellectual and practical territory of sustainability, questioning many widely held beliefs and modern assumptions about nature and society. The book reveals The Prince's deeply held perspectives on the interconnectedness of life, and illustrates how this can be (and is being) applied to secure a more sustainable future. Far from being retrogressive or Luddite in its approach, this beautifully presented and data-rich book proposes combining the best of modern science and technology with the wisdom of traditional ways, in order to restore the balance between humans and nature.

Harmony has now been made into a documentary film, which premiered on NBC in November 2010. It follows the great tradition of other educational films over the past ten years, such as *The Corporation* (2003), *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005), *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), *The 11th Hour* (2007) and *The Age of Stupid* (2009), to mention but a few. In 2010, two new films that continued this tradition were *Carbon Nation*, which is described as "an optimistic (and witty) discovery of what people are already doing, what we as a nation [America] could be doing and what the world needs to do to prevent (or at least slow down) the impending climate crisis"[2], and *GasLand*, which is an investigative documentary about the "trail of secrets, lies and contamination"[3] behind the natural gas drilling boom in the United States.

I look forward to hearing your views and suggestions about what books and films are pushing the envelope in 2011.

[1] Visser, W. & CPSL (2009) *The Top 50 Sustainability Books*. Sheffield: Greenleaf Publishing.

[2] IMDB, The Internet Movie Database - www.imdb.com

[3] <http://www.gaslandthemovie.com>

Part 2 (20 April 2011)

Cambridge Top 40 Sustainability Books of 2010

1. *Accounting for Sustainability* (Anthony **Hopwood**, Jeffrey **Unerman** & Jessica **Frie**)
2. *Adaptation to Climate Change in Southern Africa* (Steffen **Bauer** & Imme **Scholz**)
3. *A Blueprint for a Safer Planet* (Nicholas **Stern**)
4. *Building Social Business* (Muhammad **Yunus**)
5. *Cents and Sustainability* (Michael H. **Smith**, Karlson 'Charlie' **Hargroves** & Cheryl **Desh**)
6. *The Climate Files* (Fred **Pearce**)
7. *Corporate Community Involvement* (Nick **Lakin** & Veronica **Scheubel**)
8. *CSR for HR* (**Cohen**)
9. *CSR Strategies* (Sri **Urip**)
10. *Dynamic Sustainabilities* (Melissa **Leach**, Ian **Scoones** & Andy **Stirling**)
11. *The Economics of Climate Change in China* (FAN **Gang**, Nicholas **Stern**, Ottmar **Edenhofer**, XU **Shanda**, Klas **Eklund**, Frank **Ackerman**, Lailai **LI** and Karl **Hallding**)
12. *Factor Five* (Ernst von **Weizsacker**, Karlson 'Charlie' **Hargroves**, Michael H. **Smith**, Cheryl **Desha** & Peter **Stasinopoulos**)
13. *Freefall* (Joseph E. **Stiglitz**)
14. *Globalizing Responsibility* (Clive **Barnett**, Paul **Cloke**, Nick **Clarke** & Alice **Malpass**)
15. *Finders Keepers?* (Terence **Daintit**)
16. *Harmony* (HRH The **Prince of Wales**, Tony **Juniper** and Ian **Skelly**)
17. *How Bad Are Bananas?* (Mike **Berners-Lee**)
18. *Innovative CSR* (Céline **Louche**, Samuel O. **Idowu** & Walter Leal **Filho**)
19. *Integrated Sustainable Design of Buildings* (Paul **Appleby**)
20. *Nature and Culture* (Sarah **Pilgrim** and Jules **Prett**)
21. *The New Pioneers* (Tania **Ellis**)

22. *The New Rules of Green Marketing* (Jacquelyn A. **Ottman**)
23. *Next Generation Business Strategies for the Base of the Pyramid* (Ted **London** & Stuart L. **Hart**)
24. *Our Choice* (Al **Gore**)
25. *Peoplequake* (Fred **Pearce**)
26. *The Positive Deviant* (Sara **Parkin**)
27. *The Power of Sustainable Thinking* (Bob **Doppelt**)
28. *Prosperity Without Growth* (Tim **Jackson**)
29. *Requiem for a Species* (Clive **Hamilton**)
30. *Responsible Business* (Manfred **Pohl** & Nick **Tolhurst**)
31. *The Responsibility Revolution* (Jeffrey **Hollender** & Bill **Breen**)
32. *Smart Solutions to Climate Change* (Bjorn **Lomborg**)
33. *The Spirit Level* (Richard **Wilkinson** and Kate **Pickett**)
34. *Sustainability Education* (Paula **Jones**, David **Selby** & Stephen **Sterlin**)
35. *Sustainability in Austerity* (Philip **Monaghan**)
36. *The Sustainable MBA* (Giselle **Weybrecht**)
37. *Tackling Wicked Problems* (Valerie A. **Brown**, John A. **Harris** & Jacqueline Y. **Russell**)
38. *Too Smart for Our Own Good* (Craig **Dilworth**)
39. *The Top 50 Sustainability Books* (Wayne **Visser** & **CPSL**)
40. *The World Guide to CSR* (Wayne **Visser** & Nick **Tolhurst**)

Source:

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