



# Book Transient Caretakers

## Making Life on Earth Sustainable

Mervyn King and Teodorina Lessidrenska  
Pan Macmillan, 2009  
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## Recommendation

You don’t have to be a scientist to see the evidence of manmade climate change. The weather is getting warmer and will heat up more as the atmosphere traps greenhouse gases emitted by combustion of petroleum, coal or gas. The number of major hurricanes has nearly doubled in the past 30 years. Hundreds of plants and animal species are moving toward the poles to escape the heat. Northern landscapes are changing dramatically as permafrost and tundra dwindle. Glaciers and icecaps are melting. As informed readers know, if global warming continues at its present rate, the effects will be calamitous. Oceans will rise, submerging island nations and coastal cities. Food and fresh water will diminish. Extreme weather will be more common. Earth will become hostile to its inhabitants. What can be done? More than you might think. Mervyn King and Teodorina Lessidrenska offer a hopeful prescription for sustainability and change, plus an important, sobering report on the challenge of global warming and its impact. *BooksInShort* praises their analysis and their practical advice on how people can work together to make a difference.

## Take-Aways

- Manmade greenhouse gas emissions are the primary cause of global warming.
- If the world’s nations do not reduce global warming quickly, temperatures will increase dramatically in the coming decades.
- The disastrous results will include less food and water, more disease, and the rise of oceans, which will flood coastal cities and submerge some island nations.
- Global warming is only part of today’s “massive ecosystem destruction.”
- The nations, organizations, corporations and peoples of the world must immediately develop and implement bold solutions to these shared environmental problems.
- Corporate sustainable practices include everything from water and energy conservation to developing green buildings and requiring vendors to use sustainable practices.
- Corporations should report a “triple-bottom line” of “social, economic and environmental” operations.
- Cities – which use three-quarters of the world’s energy – must become more sustainable.
- People are demanding that their governments implement environmental protections.
- You can support sustainability by changing your car, your practices and your home.

## Summary

### The Sustainability Crisis

Each generation becomes caretakers of the earth’s future. This essential moral stewardship includes a heavy responsibility to pass down a sustainable – that is, habitable

– planet. Today’s generation faces this challenge with the knowledge that the earth will be far less welcoming in the future unless current environmental trends radically change. The primary issue is global warming, a manmade problem caused by excessive carbon emissions. It threatens horrific consequences.

“As transient caretakers, we have a duty to save the planet.”

All respected scientific indices clearly prove that global warming is real. The evidence is everywhere. Temperatures today average 1.5°C (2.7°F) warmer than in the past, and projections are that this will increase significantly. Unless the world’s nations take substantial action to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, average temperatures could rise up to 6.4° C (11.5° F) during the 21st century. Is this an ordinary aberration? No. To visit an earth two or three degrees Centigrade warmer, you’d have to go back three million years.

“Sustainability is based on social justice.”

Among other serious problems, global warming is melting the great ice regions and glaciers. Scientists believe the Arctic Ocean will have no ice by 2025, maybe sooner. In 2006, that prediction was pegged to 2050, at the beginning of the millennium, it was 2100. Greenland and the West Antarctic will lose their ice covers. An increase of even half a degree Celsius (or .9° F) could raise sea levels 8 to 88 cm (3 to 35 inches), devastating the 200 million people who live near oceans. Many island nations will vanish. If nothing is done to reduce greenhouse gases, “Shanghai, Tokyo, Amsterdam, Venice and New York” eventually will be under water.

“The past 50 years of human activity have changed ecosystems faster and more extensively than in any comparable previous period of time in human history.” [– 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment]

The planet’s seasons are already altered. European plants bloom in springtime and drop their leaves in the fall a week earlier than in the past. The year 2005 was the warmest since temperature record keeping began in 1850. Greenhouse gas emissions – a major cause of the “greenhouse effect” or the trapping of the sun’s heat in the atmosphere – increased 70% between 1970 and 2004. Global warming will cause more extreme weather events. The impact on food and water supplies will put millions of people at risk. Most coral reefs will die, with a dreadful effect on ocean life. Global warming will trigger an increase in disease and, ironically, could create an “ice-cold Europe” due to possible changes to the Gulf Stream.

“Approximately one-third of the existing species of flora and fauna are threatened with extinction.”

Deforestation and loss of natural habitat are reducing biodiversity as plant and animal species disappear at an alarming rate. Fish stocks are in major decline. Availability of drinking water – “the lifeblood for humans” – is a growing problem. The earth is experiencing “massive ecosystem destruction” in the form of “climate change; land conversion, degradation and desertification; biodiversity loss; and declining water supply and water pollution.” In the not-too-distant future, many people could find life on earth, or on their part of the earth, unsustainable. The world’s population is vastly outgrowing its limited resources. Nine billion people will live on the planet by 2050. Who will feed these great masses? Where will they get drinking water? How will they contend with a world blighted by the deadly effects of rising temperatures? The global economy already places an unsustainable demand on natural resources.

“With some 790 million people currently undernourished, changes in food supply due to climate change would have devastating consequences in many regions of the world.”

In 2007, California’s Global Footprint Network reported that it now takes more than 16 months to regenerate what human beings use in 12 months. This “ecological overshoot” implies that finding the resources to sustain life could become nearly impossible. The economic consequences of global warming and its related problems are enormous. Indeed, the heavy economic costs of climate change have increased six-fold since the 1960s, reaching \$60 billion for 2003.

## Corporations Must Step Up

People, governments and – as large, powerful entities – corporations have a grave responsibility to confront this problem. Multinational corporations receive operating charters from individual countries – and thus from the peoples of the world. To earn their charters, companies have a moral requirement to help make life more sustainable. Since, in theory, a corporation can exist forever, adopting a long-range view about sustainable business practices makes strategic sense. The first step for giant corporations is adopting the right business practices. Clearly, focusing only on short-term profits would make things worse – often hugely worse.

“The ultimate goal of the future should be a truly ‘zero emissions’ vehicle.”

Corporations should not only report their finances, but also their “integrated performance” based on a “triple-bottom line” of “social, economic and environmental” operations. These “sustainability reports” reports should describe the company’s profile and governance, and outline its strategic environmental plan. The report should explain the company’s impact on local ecosystems and demonstrate its compliance with “occupational, health and safety standards.” It should take note if the company tries to obligate vendors to avoid discrimination and child labor, permit “freedom of association” and support “indigenous rights.” This triple-bottom line document shows if a corporation is a good citizen, as demonstrated by these three examples of corporate environmental stewardship:

1. **Bank of America** – The bank’s Manhattan headquarters is a 54-story “green” skyscraper designed to require less energy, consume less water, and admit fresh air and natural light. Double-wall technology and special translucent glass offer optimal insulation. Recycled building materials are primary components of the construction. The building has a co-generation power plant for maximum energy efficiency.
2. **Coca-Cola Company** – Coke is a paladin of “water neutrality.” It does everything possible to reduce its “water footprint,” while supporting projects that promote water sustainability and equality. Responsible water stewardship has long been a primary goal for Coca-Cola and its 300 bottling partners in 200 countries. Among other things, this involves maximizing “water-use efficiency, water quality [and] waste-water treatment.” Coca-Cola’s water stewardship goals are to “reduce, recycle and replenish” so it becomes “the most efficient global company in terms of water use in the beverage industry.”
3. **McDonald’s Corporation** – With more than 32,000 restaurants in 118 countries, McDonald’s is the world largest food retailer. In partnership with the Environmental Defense Fund, McDonald’s is working to promote sustainability. For example, during the 1970s, it used nearly double the amount of packaging, by weight, than it does today for its signature “Big Mac, fries and a drink.” McDonald’s requires suppliers to use sustainable practices, including the achievement of “mutually established waste-reduction goals [and] production practices that minimize environmental impact.”

“Sustainable cities are generators of business ideas and opportunities – from the development of waste collection and recycling businesses, to local small heater-power plants.”

Of course, corporations can play only a part – albeit a vital one – in developing and supporting sustainability. Governments, organizations and private citizens also have important roles. The immediate goals that must be on everyone’s agenda include:

- **Green power** – Society’s future choices about energy sources will determine if a sustainable world is viable. The continued heavy use of conventional, fossil fuel, now 86% of the “world’s energy supply,” is a death sentence for the planet. People must begin to give precedence to alternative sources, such as solar, geothermal, wind, hydrogen fuel cells and biofuels. This transition to alternative energy sources will take time. Society’s short-term focus (the next 5 to 15 years) will be on inexpensive fossil fuels. The development and practical application of alternative technologies should happen over the medium term (10 to 25 years). The longer term (25 years and onward) should become the era of clean energy sources.
- **Electrical transmission** – Today’s long-lines system is grossly inefficient. “Smart grids,” which would constantly adjust for peak electrical loads, are the answer, along with “smart appliances,” which would also monitor and adapt to the grid.
- **Energy efficiency and conservation** – Buildings, factories, vehicles, appliances, all machines, must become more energy-efficient. The methods are already in place. The missing ingredient is the will to change. The first step is energy audits all around.
- **Water** – As Benjamin Franklin once said, “When the well’s dry, we’ll know the value of water.” For many, the well is almost dry. Using better methods of water harvesting and distribution can fight scarcity. Smarter water pricing and trading policies, including quotas, will help. Water pollution is controllable. Desalination and advances in recycling also can make a major difference.
- **Waste** – Industrial, municipal, household and agricultural waste often are toxic, but with the right management, waste can become a valuable resource that can be put to productive use by, for example, energy recovery via incineration. Reusability, recycling and composting help. Eliminating or severely reducing waste creation is the best option, along with minimizing waste disposal.
- **Households** – You can make major contributions to sustainability in your own home. With energy conservation, you can cut your power usage by 40%. Use compact fluorescent light bulbs (CFLs) that need 65% less energy than regular bulbs. Adjust your air conditioning and heating one degree warmer or cooler. Insulate with double-panel glass windows. Install a timer on your water heater. Use energy-efficient appliances. Turn off electronic devices. Repair water leaks. Install water-efficient appliances. Take short showers.
- **Transportation** – This industry is responsible for 15% to 18% of all greenhouse gas emissions. It must offer vehicles that have low (or no) carbon emissions. Hybrids, which use gas and electric power, greatly reduce emissions. “Zero emissions” vehicle, such as sun-, hydrogen- and air-powered cars, are now under development. All-electric cars also may be the answer. You can help by purchasing highly recyclable vehicles, carpooling, car sharing, biking and using mass transportation.
- **Urban planning** – Cities account for three-quarters of the world’s energy use, and all but 20% of its outpouring of greenhouse gases. Good urban planning should free city dwellers from their dependence on personal vehicles and promote public transportation. Municipalities should require builders to use energy-efficient designs and clean technologies, and should prioritize “green buildings” and “green neighborhoods.” This approach is increasingly important as cities balloon. “By 2015, there will be 23 megacities,” centers with populations in excess of 10 million people.
- **Tourism** – Climate directly affects tourism, a robust industry worldwide. For example, island nations worry about the effects of rising oceans and global warming on their tourism activities, not to mention their continued existence. The newest trend in the travel industry is ecotourism, featuring visits to coral reefs, mountain parks and so on. Many travel and tourism industry leaders are promoting sustainability. More hotels and resorts are “going green” and adopting eco-friendly policies.
- **In the garden** – Gardening is a satisfying, even serene, activity. Gardeners can make the world more sustainable. Cut back on decorative paving to promote evaporation. In the North, place evergreens on your home’s north side and deciduous trees on the south for good summer shade and winter sunlight. Do the reverse in the South.

“There are many things each of us, as individuals, can do to reduce our carbon emissions. Start by establishing the ‘carbon footprint’ of your household, and then take steps to reduce that footprint.”

Around the world, people are demanding that their governments implement sustainability policies for the future. In the U.S., 61% of the people rank environment issues as critical, as do 60% of Western Europeans and 70% of the Chinese. Governments, particularly in Northern Europe, are enacting visionary legislation to promote sustainability. People should use the power of the ballot to pressure their governments to make sustainability a primary objective. Already, “there is evidence that people are voting for environmentally friendly leaders.” Consumers must exert similar pressure on corporations to be more environmentally responsible, and must support companies that emphasize sustainability in their practices and products. Then, individuals must reduce their personal carbon footprints.

“What kind of world would you like your children and your children’s children to inherit?” [ – John Elkington, *Green Sustainability Guide*]

Sustainability affects everyone. All elements of society and all people must work together to help the earth endure.

## About the Authors

**Mervyn King**, a former judge in South Africa and an expert on corporate governance, chairs the Global Reporting Initiative. **Teodorina Lessidrenska**, Ph.D. is a sustainability consultant.

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