



Book Co-Opportunity

Join Up for a Sustainable, Resilient, Prosperous World

John Grant
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Recommendation

Author John Grant wants to change the world, not so that he makes money and not because the planet’s going to flame out, but because it’s the right thing to do and he’ll have fun. He asserts that the Earth can sustain everyone: There’s sufficient water and energy, and people can grow enough food. But humans ruin everything rather than replenishing the ecosystems they need. Individual citizens must recognize their stake in the Earth and take altruistic responsibility for creating a better world. In the face of devastating climate change, Grant asks, how can the lessons of marketing transform consumers – who obsess over getting more stuff for less money – into citizens who are willing to do what’s necessary to avert disaster? Though his writing style is fragmentary and convoluted, his heart and his information are clearly in the right place. If you’re ready to be a part of the solution in a post-consumer society, *BooksInShort* says this book is for you.

Take-Aways

- An economic system that takes resources without replenishing them generates destructive climate change.
- Societal transitions occur only when private individuals – not politicians – take personal responsibility.
- Hierarchical systems are not as robust as “parallel co-operative” systems.
- For sustainable change, society must tackle root causes, not symptoms.
- The status quo is a bottleneck blocking widespread social transition on ecological issues.
- The Gross Domestic Product describes only one type of success and omits other successes.
- We need to redefine the meaning of prosperity so that connecting to others offers greater satisfaction than acquiring more stuff.
- Transparency in supply chains tells customers what’s really at stake in their purchases.
- Free market capitalism fueled by speculation prevents “economic resilience.”
- Companies like Nokia embrace “supply-side” sustainability by using ethically sourced materials and taking back old phones to recycle them.

Summary

“Creating a Climate for Change”

Governments should protect the interests of citizens and, presumably, preside over creating a better world. However, short-term thinking about profits drives governmental policy. Meanwhile, joy, love and abundance don’t often arise in public discussions about environmental issues. But they should. Direct contact with nature and with their own communities could motivate people to find environmental solutions based on cooperation, rather than enlightened self-interest. Eventually folks must recognize that climate change, energy shortages, biodiversity breakdowns and poverty threaten everyone.

“The most difficult challenge...is that people have to change themselves, their worldview and the workings of their community.”

While everyone has heard of climate change, few understand it. In numerous studies, business leaders and most others rate climate as a low priority. A majority of people interviewed believe that climate change will not affect their lives or their nations. By contrast, politicians rate climate change as a high priority. Politicians are generally well informed about this issue and feel responsible for fomenting change.

“Citizenship is not just a label. It is a collective process.”

The environmental movement appeals to consumers with facts about using less wasteful products and supporting policies that promote sustainability. An alternative might be appealing to people as citizens. Citizens, not consumers, are the constituents of democracy and thus participate in public policy. Alarmist “doom and gloom” scenarios make people want to run and hide, or to take tiny actions – like buying fluorescent light bulbs – if they’re convenient. But solving climate change doesn’t have to be a dour job. It can and must be creative, fun and engaging. Fostering the demand for sustainable ways of life requires using every possible tool: lectures, videos, incentives and more. The world needs better stories that illustrate the dangers of climate change and how it affects each person individually.

“The wealth gap is not just born out of unequal success, it is also the...result of exploitation.”

A report by British government economist Nicholas Stern concluded that the United Kingdom should spend 2% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on climate change now. Otherwise, the effects of climate change will impose a permanent annual price tag of 5% to 20% of GDP. That’s the difference between finding a leaky pipe in your ceiling and fixing it immediately, or letting the pipe leak for 10 years while your ceiling caves in. This is an effective illustration: a leaky pipe is neither catastrophic nor is fixing it impossible. It is plain good sense.

“Climate change – along with other global crises in ecosystems, finance, food, poverty and equity – is a test case of our current political system.”

Processes that connect ideas, people and the planet should be goal-directed, should function over distributed networks rather than traditional hierarchies, and must be democratic. Processes that emphasize human potential, creativity and longevity would improve the common lot.

Redefining the Meaning of Success

On a snowy day in England in 2009, 1,000 schools closed. This cost £3 billion in GDP, but so what? Most people remember it fondly as a day that fostered a sense of community, when parents could play with their kids and neighbors helped those who needed it. Leisure time and playfulness are missing in modern life. How do we get them back without having to sacrifice modern conveniences?

“We need public forums to air and manage our fears, and convert them into rational action.”

For many, wearing the latest fashion or driving a new car provides social status. Such trendiness creates a lot of waste. After the 2008 recession, the fashion industry and new automobiles experienced a drop in sales. Perhaps Facebook played a part; Facebook provides a virtual way to “keep up with the Joneses.” Millions of people now create, maintain and score social status online. Thus Facebook reduces real world waste. And Facebook users regard it as an addition to their lives, not as a substitute for acquisition. This phenomenon suggests the possibility of redefining the meaning of prosperity so that connecting to others offers greater satisfaction than acquiring more stuff.

“We need someone with the gumption of Gandhi to actually push this through.”

In many ways, the rise of consumerism has isolated people from each other and from their communities. A U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics study says that Americans spend only an average of 12 minutes per day participating in community activities. By contrast, the average American watches 157 minutes of TV a day. Appealing to people’s desire to connect with others is one way to help consumers “grow up” into more responsible, actively engaged citizens. Other ideas that might have the same impact include individual calls to appreciate nature, to become an active citizen, to learn a craft, to continue getting an education and to care about generations to come.

“Marketers think of their job primarily as ‘selling more stuff.’ But what if consumerism – ‘buying more stuff’ – were the key problem?”

Gardening provides a powerful tool for engaging people and communities. In community-supported agriculture, residents contribute to a local farm in exchange for “shares” of its produce. This connects people’s fortunes to the land and puts a face on the business of food. “Guerrilla gardening” introduces an element of play. Locals lob dirt and seed “grenades” to cultivate a derelict urban lot. On International Sunflower Guerrilla Gardening Day, people all over the world sowed sunflowers, a plant that absorbs lead from the soil and makes land more hospitable to vegetables. Michelle Obama set an example of responsible citizenship by planting an organic vegetable garden at the White House. Nobel winner Wangari Maathai has planted more than 40 million trees in Africa’s Green Belt. By participating in such processes, citizens become educated and take on the responsibility for solutions to environmental problems.

“The world today is contracted out and those producing results are separated from those demanding these results.”

Nokia, the mobile phone firm, has embraced “supply-side” sustainability principles like ethically sourced materials and lower emissions in its manufacturing processes. Nokia goes even further by reminding customers to unplug their chargers and by collecting old phones for proper disposal. Nokia offers a line of “remade” phones crafted from old tin cans or recycled wood. These remade phones raise the consciousness of customers in terms of quality, recycling and craftsmanship. Nokia encourages their users to upgrade digitally rather than buying new phones, thus building in durability as a product value while reducing waste and redefining corporate citizenship.

A Little Sunshine Goes a Long Way

In 1986, the U.S. Congress passed the Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act, which requires companies to disclose the quantity and type of toxic chemicals their facilities release into the environment. This “Toxic Release Inventory” (TRI) data was made public by mid-1988. *USA Today* used it to identify the top 10 polluters. Companies raced to clean up when this once-hidden information became public.

“The reduction of labor to mechanical actions leads to de-skilling, reducing the working population to tedium. It opens you to competition from those who can make the same cheap crap even cheaper.”

Earth Open Source, a “working group” in the U.S., joins with other partners to develop transparent systems with ratings that tell consumers about the origins of their

food: what it costs environmentally in terms of carbon emissions, and what penalty its creation assesses against people in terms of social justice issues. Walmart is a surprising leader in this effort. It is developing a product ratings system and has asked its 100,000 suppliers to make public information about their sustainability practices. Once this kind of data is available to consumers, suppliers will compete to improve their ratings. This results in better food, healthier choices and the adoption of sustainable practices.

People-Focused Economics

Continuous economic growth as currently practiced unavoidably adds to the degradation of the Earth’s resources and to climate change. Understandably, no one wants to hear this. When politicians talk about tackling climate change, they talk in terms of “green jobs” and the “green economy.” Some green business sectors related to alternative energies and ways of manufacturing and building will grow in the traditional sense. But expanding GDP means increased emissions. That puts the Earth on a collision course with climate change disaster on a scale that technology cannot mitigate.

“Most modern brands of any value have a ‘craft’ basis – compare the design of Apple computers to a cheap generic PC.”

The 2008 recession came about due to the short-term practices of speculating investors. The recession emphasizes the brittleness of modern economies and their inability to absorb shocks. To recover, borrowers must extract more than they owe from the same pool of wealth. The only way to do so is to increase that pool. That growth won’t happen if the economy sinks and investors withdraw from the process.

“Our findings suggest that a variety of tipping elements could reach their critical point within this century under human-induced climate change.” (Prof. Tim Lenton)

Economists have pointed to GDP as the standard measure of a nation’s economic success for a long time, yet it has nothing to do with human well-being. Maybe it’s time to redefine success. How about a “General Progress Indicator” instead? Society must foster economic resilience and long-term thinking that goes beyond short-term returns. The “1BlockOffGrid” program by Virgance persuades groups of homeowners along a street to pool their resources to equip their roofs with solar panels. “Crowdfunding” encourages direct investment in all kinds of environmental projects. Direct funding means lower interest rates and no unreasonable dividends. Australia’s BarterCard lets cash-strapped businesses buy what they need to stay productive. In exchange, they trade a service or some of their products. BarterCard has been in the interest-free barter business for 18 years and has 25,000 members in several countries.

Abundant and Resilient

A “lean and mean” economy may be profitable, but it is not an inherent characteristic of the natural order. Nature is abundant and redundant, and thus resilient in the face of shocks or catastrophes. Many studies have shown that the smaller a farm, the greater its yield per hectare. So even though the world has been shifting to ever-larger farms – as per the agribusiness model – to feed ever-growing populations, a multiplicity of small farms serving local markets would do the job better.

“Climate change from now on will not be gradual – nature doesn’t do gradual change...So forget what environmentalists have told you about nature being a helpless victim of human excess. The truth is the opposite. She is a wild and resourceful beast given to fits of rage.” (Fred Pearce, *The Last Generation*)

The food crisis of 2008 caused food prices to spike. With banking unstable, speculative investment capital flowed into farming. Investors bought up large tracts of farmland in South America and Africa hoping to apply the industrial economics of agribusiness to newer areas, even in the face of its proven failure. There are much better ways to feed the world’s population.

“It’s a group issue – like the social experiment in the waiting room. We need to see our milieu reacting. It’s not an information task...no matter how much smoke pours in, if no one is moving, no one will move.”

Many nonprofit organizations that help feed the hungry are calling for “food sovereignty.” They seek to prevent market forces alone from dictating what farmers grow where and for whom. Via Campesina wants local communities to preserve their acreage for future generations. In its supporters’ view, food is nutrition first and an investment commodity second.

In an earlier age, when craftsmanship bore a higher value than efficiency, people worked fewer grueling hours and carried out work they took pride in doing. “Adam Smith capitalism” destroyed self-regulating, abundant systems of production like trade guilds and replaced them with mechanized production based on cheap, unskilled, replaceable labor. A system of “enlightened self-interest,” motivated solely by profit, replaced mutual responsibility and cooperation based on community values and goals. This system devastates human life and the Earth’s resources.

A central tenet of Adam Smith’s reasoning was that wages would always remain adequate. But more than 100 years of industrialized capitalism have proven the opposite: Corporations and competition drive wages down to meager subsistence levels, which business justifies in the name of profit. Adam Smith posited that profits were highest wherever there was greatest competition among workers. How does making workers fight each other for jobs benefit society? It doesn’t.

Recycling the enthusiasm of the space race into a new “Earth Race” could focus a generation’s attention on solving the planet’s problems. Good ideas abound. Take biomimicry, for example. This process “mimics” the way nature works and engages nature as a partner. The wings of dragonflies inspired designer Michael Pawlyn to create the lightweight frames for the Eden Project biomes. Pawlyn’s solar-powered greenhouse design for The Sahara Project goes a step further, utilizing the condensation of seawater to create fresh water to grow food, cool the air and restore barren landscapes. This idea is already drawing capital investment. Replenishing nature’s stores instead of depleting them is the true future for human industry and innovation.

About the Author

John Grant, author of *The Green Marketing Manifesto*, is an innovator in sustainability marketing.