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The good signs of progress

It has been only six months since the last Business Leaders Forum on Sustainable Development, but this year's gathering in early April had a distinctly positive atmosphere – especially considering it closely followed the jolting results of the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, the most comprehensive review of the state of Earth's natural systems ever undertaken.

1360 experts from 95 countries reported that in just the last 50 years, the rising human population has polluted or over-exploited two-thirds of the world's ecological systems, to the point now, where 'the ability of the planet's ecosystems to sustain future generations can no longer be taken for granted'. Surely, if ever there was a confirmation point for immediate, coordinated and decisive action for more sustainable practices, this is it?

There were opening references to the Assessment report at the Business Leaders Forum, and a reminder that we need faster leads from industry and government to effect wholesale changes, but what followed were encouraging signs that Australia's companies are increasingly making sustainable practice fundamental to their operations. Westpac beat 137 British and 27 Australian competitors to top this year's voluntary Corporate Responsibility Index, an outstanding result. The Forum also emphasised, however, the true commitment being shown by other companies in the Index – such as Fosters Group and IBM Australia – to opening themselves up to scrutiny and making changes.

Endorsement of the worth of companies' commitments to sustainable practice came from numbers showing that those listed organisations with high corporate and social responsibility ratings are outperforming their market sectors by 3 per cent.



That's nice fruit to bear.

The Forum also saw the launch of *The National Advantage of Nations*, a new, Australian contribution to update the international

sustainability literature. Notably, this global-scale reference book is the initiative of a team of young engineers who, working with many of the world's authorities on sustainable practice, have stepped up to help organisations change for the way ahead. Both their message and leadership are heartening. See page 31.

Pages 8 to 15 present the first of what we plan will be more regular articles about developments in the Asia-Pacific region. National progress is, of course, better informed by this outlook, and we hope readers will enjoy reporters' perspectives presented from Bangkok and Shanghai.

Finally, on page 18, *Reign of fire* reports on researchers' new understanding of both the dynamics of our rainforest ecosystems, and their high vulnerability to encroaching development and climate change. Australia has some of the most intact rainforest areas remaining on the planet. This emerging research, while a cause for greater concern, should also help motivate the appropriate measures for better protection.

Enjoy your reading.

James Porteous
Managing Editor



Next, in issue 125

Our planned follow-up article to the Misima mine story, published in *ECOS* 122 (November–December 2004), has been held over to the next issue (125). That issue will also feature Focus sections on *Recycling efficiency* and *Aboriginal knowledge for sustainable practice*, as well as a feature on the applications of emerging RNAi technology.