Reviews

The smarts on evolving society

As the global population races towards the nine billion mark by 2050, The Planet of the Thinking Animal: Surviving the 21st Century offers more insight into the problems that face global society and possible ways to negotiate a sustainable existence despite them.

Author Tor Hundloe is Emeritus Professor of Environmental Management at the University of Queensland and an early pioneer of the environmental movement. Through seven case studies of countries (or groups of countries) with sustainability problems and advanced solutions, he illustrates aspects of politics, economics or culture that either frustrate or facilitate progress towards sustainable development.

Setting the scene, the first four chapters look at issues such as the ownership and sustainable use of water; overfishing, aquaculture and sustainable fishing; oil and its alternatives; and the role of ecotourism in sustainable development.

The first case study focuses on Fiji and how this small island nation’s future is tied to its past. Hundloe illustrates how in some countries, progress on economic and environmental sustainability relies on overall social sustainability – resolving Fiji’s ethnic conflict will be a key factor in its development.

Next, the author looks at the future of the United Arab Emirates, an ‘oil-rich but skill-poor’ country. He addresses what may happen when the oil runs out.

The third chapter considers Russia and other countries in transition and what we can learn by scrutinising countries that have been ‘shocked’ into radical change. The author moves on to Asia – particularly China, Indonesia and Thailand – and reviews how little is being done to stem the environmental degradation resulting from rapid capitalist development.

Chapter nine turns to the positive future-facing Scandinavian countries, particularly Norway. Hundloe considers the social, political and economic values and attitudes that see these countries outperforming the rest of the world as environmentally conscious and sustained societies.

Finally, Hundloe addresses the Australian environmental story and draws the conclusion that Australia is ‘very much a work in progress’.

Each chapter has footnotes and references for further reading. The book is peppered with break-out boxes of interesting facts or anecdotes, and tables and graphs of useful statistics. Overall, the book presents an eclectic range of information on a now familiar theme in an easy-to-read style, effectively marrying the past and the present.

Wendy Pyper

350 reasons for climate action

On October 24, through the website www.350.org, as well as Twitter, Facebook, Flickr and YouTube, the International Day of Climate Action rallied millions of people in 181 countries to participate in more than 5200 events calling for strong action and bold leadership on climate change. According to organisers it was ‘the most widespread day of political action in the planet’s history’.

The focus of the campaign, the number 350, refers to the concentration of atmospheric carbon dioxide that most climate scientists say is the safe upper limit to avoid severe consequences for life on Earth. With current levels around 387 parts per million (ppm), and ahead of Copenhagen’s climate negotiations in December, 350.org organisers were keen to ensure the 350-ppm target is ‘not only on the table, but something we really try for’.

Blair Palese, CEO of 350.org Australia, estimates more than 10 000 Australians, including leading environmental, research and union organisations, took part in 240 events around the country. The day commenced with events on Sydney beaches, and moved to the steps of the Opera House for a concert, a giant human ‘350’, and a tall ship cruising through Sydney Harbour with ‘350’ emblazoned on the masts. Other events included bike rides in Melbourne and Adelaide, 350 frisbees being tossed simultaneously in Brisbane, divers on the Great Barrier Reef highlighting the 350ppm target, and gatherings in remote areas including Tasmania’s Styx rainforest and the Kimberley.

Organisers around the world are now sending photos, videos and letters from the event to their government leaders in the lead up to Copenhagen.

‘We know it’s a challenge but we must align our political agenda to what the science of climate change calls for,’ Ms Palese says.

Wendy Pyper