

A big fix: Radical solutions for Australia's environmental crisis by Ian Lowe.
Sydney. Black Inc Press, 2005, pp. 117, A\$16.95, paperback, ISBN: 1 86395 126 1.



The tsunami of December 2004. Hurricane Katrina drowning New Orleans in October 2005. Oil prices going through the roof. Yet another drought engulfing NSW in Australia's winter of 2006. We all know mankind is heading towards environmental and thus also social disaster. Sometimes it feels like sitting in a car that is heading towards a wall at high speed, with no steering wheel and no brakes. We know dimly that things must change, but how? What is the situation really? Which aspects of the environmental crisis must be addressed? What order of priority? And what chances of averting disaster do we have if some nations, say China or the USA simply don't play ball? These and other questions plague many concerned citizens today

Thus it was both a pleasure and a pain to read this slim and accessible study. I recommend it to anyone who wishes to have a general overview over our environmental dilemmas, and anyone with a specific interest in Australia's ecological crises. The problems under review are intelligently outlined, with just the right amount of data to back up the argument. The core subject (Australia's environment) is convincingly intertwined with the global picture. There is no scientific jargon, and the style is a model of clarity. Lowe also provides a much-needed historical survey of how we got to where we now stand, and what measures, efficient and inefficient ones, have already been tried, in Australia and elsewhere.

The subtitle of this valuable little book promises 'solutions for Australia's environmental crisis', radical solutions to boot. This made me suspicious and curious, in that order. Any informed layman knows by now that Australia's single biggest environmental problem, dryland salinity, has in places proved resistant to any form of intervention. As was the case with the deforestation of the Dalmatian *Karst* by Venetian shipbuilders in the middle ages, the damage may be irreversible. Is it misleading, then, to promise solutions?

Ian Lowe is one of Australia's foremost environmental scientists. He is professor emeritus of science, technology and society at Griffith University, and the present head of the Australian Conservation Society. So he is no starry-eyed greenie claiming that our problems will disappear if we only turn vegan, chant mantras, and return the land to its 'traditional custodians'. As an aside he tells us that firestick farming badly degraded the original Australian environment. Before offering us his solutions, he presents the present conditions. A core problem is population growth, and here I ran into a credibility problem. Lowe is for stabilizing it, but does not come clear on how this is to be achieved, and within what time frame. Even though Australia's reproduction rate of 1.78 (2004) now lies below the replacement rate of 2.05, the population, so he points out, will continue to grow *even without immigration* since owing to previously much higher birth rates the cohort of women in the reproductive age group is still growing. The growth figure he gives us is 120 000 per year until about 2020, when it will peak and decline. But what about immigration, which stands at around 100 000 a year at present? That's a touchy area, says Lowe without going further, and we all know why. To recapitulate: even if a total stop to immigration were imposed, which no party now in parliament

seriously considers, the population would still grow until 2020. That being so, how then can Lowe claim that Australia's population can be stabilized if immigration is capped at 60 000 per year?

But this is the only major criticism I have. The parts on sustainability and the environmental crisis in Australia are concise and powerful. They provide excellent teaching material for anyone working in this field. I did know that the major cause of dryland salinity has been the relentless clearing of bushland, but I did not know that land clearing still goes on, mainly in Queensland. Nor did I know that scientists warned of the impending consequences already in the 1950s. That is grim news, considering that scientists today are also warning of what disasters will hit our globe, and the politicians shrug their shoulders. 3 million hectares of farm land have already been lost, maybe forever; this represents five per cent of Australia's arable land, or the size of the Netherlands. A further 5.7 million hectares are at risk and can only be saved if farming on them is stopped or modified. In the long term, Australia will have to replant ten billion trees that were felled since colonisation, a massive project.

In the final chapter Lowe lists twelve measures that must be taken if Australia wants to fix its problems, matched with eight practical steps that each one of us can take. None of them seem unreasonable; indeed some are curiously obvious from the European vantage point. For instance, the average Australian household uses fifty per cent of its energy demand to either heat or cool its rooms. This is due to the change in building practices, from English brick or stone buildings, which are well insulated against outside temperatures, to cheap American-style wooden structures, which are not. It is likewise strange that in my country Austria with its moderate climate, ninety per cent of all new buildings have solar heating, while Australia with its much warmer climate has only a fraction of that share, and the main reason for this lack of enlightened energy use is the availability of cheap coal in New South Wales.

Other suggestions some seem unrealistic though. Take global warming, which Lowe calls a greater danger than world terrorism. Yes, Australia too must sign the Kyoto protocol, but it must also lean on its strategic partners the USA and China to do the same. A core problem surely is that reform will not happen as long as politicians prioritise the next election over the next generation. Too bloody right – does anyone out there seriously expect them to change that behaviour?

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