Second Edition

An Introduction to Sustainability

Environmental, Social and Personal Perspectives

COMPANION @ WEBSITE

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

When I stepped down as director of **RMIT University's Centre for Global Research** at the end of 2011, I was invited to take responsibility for teaching an introduction to sustainability course for students enrolled in a wide range of degrees within RMIT's School of Global, Urban and Social Studies. It had been more than ten years since I had taught at undergraduate level and I was rather daunted by the prospect of introducing such a complex and contested topic to such a diverse array of students, most of them in their very first year of university study. To make matters worse, I knew that a significant number of the students resented having to take a course on 'environmental issues' when they planned careers in human or social services. How could I convince them that sustainability is about social wellbeing as much as environmental care and that every person on Earth needs to grapple with the dilemmas of sustainability? How could I convince them that the idea of 'sustainability' has not already lost its vitality and relevance? What particular concepts and themes would I select in order to engage the students with the history and enduring relevance of the idea?

RMIT University Centre for Global Research was established in 1992, initially under the name Globalism Institute, to conduct research on sources of insecurity, community sustainability and globalisation and culture.

Fortunately, the course I inherited already had very strong foundations; with a lot of work going into the way it was set up and taught for nearly ten years before it was handed to me. I also inherited a talented team of tutors, most of whom had already worked in the course before my arrival and had figured out ways to make it appeal to diverse cohorts of students. I was confident that I had accumulated enough experience and expertise to add value to what had been done before me. My own career – inside and outside of universities – had taken many twists and turns since I completed an Honours degree in animal ecology at the University of Sydney in the early 1970s. This course gave me a rare opportunity to draw on much of that diverse experience.

After completing my first degree I had decided that life as a scientist was not for me and I left university to become a community development worker in several different Australian cities. I returned to university in the early 1990s to complete a Ph.D. in 'development studies' – with a thesis focusing on environment and development in Latin America. From there I was able to win a position in the very innovative Social Ecology teaching and research programme at the University of Western Sydney. Ten years later I returned to RMIT University, where I had undertaken my Ph.D., to help build what was then called the Globalism Institute (now Centre for Global Research). For another ten years my research focused on challenges facing local communities in Australia and Sri Lanka in the context of global change. My career path might be called opportunistic rather than premeditated and yet it seemed that I had been preparing myself to teach in the area of environmental and social sustainability for a very long time.

THE CONCEPT AS WE NOW KNOW IT

In introducing first-year undergraduate students to the concept of sustainability I argue that we can draw hope from the fact that we humans only really began to think about it as a global challenge in the 1970s. The 1987 report prepared by a special United Nations commission headed by three-times Norwegian prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland – published under the title *Our Common Future* – drew attention to a growing body of research showing that on a global scale human economic activity had been degrading planetary ecosystems while the majority of people in the world faced worsening conditions for life, often caused by environmental degradation. Reflecting the growth of global awareness that had gathered momentum since the early 1970s, the report argued that we now face 'interlocking crises' because 'the global economy and global ecology' have been 'locked … together in new ways' (p. 5). The **Brundtland Report** did not coin the term 'sustainability' and nor did it initiate the argument that growing global human impacts on non-human environments cannot be sustained. However, it did give birth to the notion of 'environmentally sustainable development' and it triggered a series of global gatherings and negotiations aimed at giving substance to this headline concept. In an interview marking the 20th anniversary of the report which carries her name, Brundland noted that her commission could have taken the easy option of making recommendations which would have been relatively easy for national governments to adopt.[1] Instead they decided to highlight challenges which are transnational or global in scale and they decided to write a report arguing that sustainability is not a matter to be left to experts or governments because it affects the future of every person living on Planet Earth, and those who are yet to be born. The report argued that sustainable use of the planet's non-human 'resources' cannot be separated from the ongoing need to radically reduce global poverty; i.e. sustainability is about *both* environment and society. While it argued that much more needs to be done to improve equity of opportunity in the present (*intragenerational*) we now need to focus on the even bigger challenge of ensuring equity of opportunity for future generations (*intergenerational*).

Brundtland Report was a report prepared for the United Nations by a World Commissionon Environment and Development headed by Gro Harlem Burndtland. It was published in 1987 under the title *Our Common Future*.

In the context of human history, 25–30 years is a relatively short time to have been grappling with the challenges of global sustainability. We know much more about the challenges we face than ever before and yet this book will make it clear that the challenges are continuing to escalate rather than abate. This is a rather challenging message to present to first-year university students as they embark on the professional development course they have selected. For that reason, I was determined to infuse my teaching with the conviction that there are still reasons for feeling hopeful about the future of humanity. This book does not shy away from the extent and complexity of the global challenges we face; indeed it seeks to counteract all tendencies towards denial or retreat. It argues that we need to work with the rather perplexing concept of 'wicked problems' in order to ensure that action taken in the name of sustainability does not, inadvertently, make things worse.

ARGUMENTS FOR HOPE

At the beginning of the course that I teach at RMIT University, I tell the students that we are embarking on a journey together, noting that it may at times feel like

a roller-coaster ride through the ups and downs of hope and despair. Here I refer them to an article I wrote (Mulligan 2008) after a rather challenging journey from Melbourne to Edinburgh which is summarised in the box below. After a series of mishaps along the way I finally enjoyed a relaxing walk around the festive and beautiful city of my apparent destination only to find myself seduced by a thought from the famed Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson which continues to prompt me to remember that journeys are never fully completed and that they always hold the hope of new and exciting discoveries.

To travel hopefully ...

In August 2006 I arrived at Melbourne Airport to catch a flight that would take me to London and on to Edinburgh where I was due to present a paper at an international conference on 'art and society'. About a week before my departure Heathrow Airport in London had been thrown into prolonged chaos in the wake of credible threats made to use bombs to bring down undisclosed flights to the USA and I found that extraordinary security measures had been imposed on all passengers travelling to or through Heathrow Airport. A ban had been imposed on all cabin bags and the only thing that each passenger could carry on board was a clear plastic bag with passport and documents; even pens were banned to prevent their potential use as weapons. The early symptoms of a head cold that I felt when the plane took off had blossomed into a raging illness by the time the plane landed, some 24 hours later, at Heathrow.

Because I had travelled with a set of car keys in my pocket, I was plucked out of the line of passengers wanting transit on to Edinburgh and told that I would need to check out through airport security and re-enter the domestic terminal so that my keys could be given a security clearance. It mattered little because all flights to Edinburgh had been cancelled for the day and no intending passengers – transit or otherwise – could get inside the overcrowded domestic terminal. A security guard told me that I needed to head for an information marquee erected outside the terminal to get information about possible flights to Edinburgh. The marquee was too small to cope with the crowds of people wanting to know if or when they might be able to get on a plane and I was obliged to wait in a very long queue. To make matters worse it started to rain. I stood in the rain, clutching my plastic bag and nursing a heavy head, alongside a woman holding an infant; all of us hoping that we would eventually make it inside the tent. I felt I got a small insight into what it might feel like to be a refugee or asylum seeker, although we were blessed by the presence of some cheerful volunteers from the city and by the some amusing running commentary offered by a Scottish joker in the queue. A sense of great frustration slowly transformed into a palpable feeling of camaraderie as people took time to share stories and boost each other's spirits. A volunteer took the mother and her family to the head of the queue inside the tent, amid cheers from those alarmed at her plight.

After a night in an expensive Heathrow hotel, I managed to get myself on a flight to Edinburgh although my booked-in luggage would not arrive for more than a week. With only the clothes I was wearing and my small plastic bag I finally arrived at my university accommodation, grateful to see the sun shining for a change. The next day I set out for an exploratory walk around a city in a mood to enjoy its annual **festival season** and high on the hill, before reaching the famed castle, I noticed a sign pointing to a rather quaint old stone building that served as the Edinburgh Writers Centre. In a room dedicated to the work of the celebrated novelist and travel writer Robert Louis Stevenson a quote from his work was prominently displayed, as if designed to catch my attention. It read: 'To travel hopefully is better than to arrive.'

Edinburgh's festival season occurs in August each year when a range of concurrent festivals are held; perhaps the most famous being the Edinburgh Comedy Festival.

The Stevenson citation spoke directly to my own travel experience because I learnt to enjoy the journey once I stopped worrying about when, or even if, I would reach my destination. I learnt something about my own resilience and about the capacity of my fellow travellers to act with unusual care towards each other. At a global level, humanity is heading into a period of great uncertainty. No one can really be sure what lies ahead of us. However, we will learn a lot about what we are capable of achieving together if we can learn to travel hopefully.

SUCCESSES AND FAILURES SINCE 1987

The Brundtland Report began with a section on 'Successes and Failures' in meeting 'the global challenge'. At the time, the failures clearly outnumbered the successes and that continues to be the case. While some manifestations of environmental degradation that were highlighted in the report – such as 'acid rain' in Europe – have been effectively mitigated, others – such as deforestation and the accumulation of greenhouse gases caused by the burning of fossil fuels – continue to head in the wrong direction. It was never going to be easy to address challenges which transcend the jurisdictions of national governments, and it is important to note successes as well as failures. A gathering of world leaders in Montreal in 1989 agreed on a protocol aimed at phasing out the use of gases known to be causing the dangerous thinning of the atmosphere's ozone layer and action on this global problem has had significant success. The Brundtland Report laid the foundations for the very large and energetic Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and its pacesetting *Agenda 21* proposals were adopted by many nations. The Rio Earth Summit, in turn, built momentum for the global convention for 'biological diversity' and other agreements on combatting the spread of deserts and protecting endangered wetlands. Efforts have been made to establish rules to prevent the degradation of marine environments in 'international waters' although these are very hard to enforce. The Rio Earth Summit set wheels in motion for the global summit held in Kyoto in 1997 which aimed to develop an international protocol for reducing emissions of greenhouse gases. Unfortunately, it is much harder to phase out the use of fossil fuels than to replace the use of

the gases which thin the ozone layer, and action on reducing greenhouse gases has been much less successful than phasing out the use of the ozone-depleting gases. Ongoing efforts to reach a global agreement on the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions continued to be frustrated by governments prioritising short-term national economic interests until frustrations boiled over at a very disappointing summit held in Copenhagen in 2009. However, the disappointment of Copenhagen stimulated an intensified effort to transcend national differences and the next summit, held in Paris in December 2015, produced much better results. The Brundtland Report's radical call to put global interests ahead of narrowly conceived national interests is finding some success.

Other successes have been racked up at a conceptual level. In particular, English planner, psychologist and sustainability consultant, **John Elkington**, teased out the concept of environmentally sustainable development by introducing the 'triple bottom line' model in 1994, suggesting the need to balance economic development policies and practices with equal concern for environmental impacts and social outcomes. This, in turn, led to the very influential 'three sectors' model for representing the challenges of sustainability (see Figure 1.1). While ecologists have long argued that human wellbeing ultimately depends on the effective functioning of a host of overlapping ecosystems, the concept of 'ecosystem services' has gained considerable momentum as a way of representing this within economic and social development policies and practices. While environmentalists worry that many of the

John Elkington (b. 1949) is an English planner and psychologist, turned sustainability consultant, who invented the 'triple bottom line' concept in 1994.

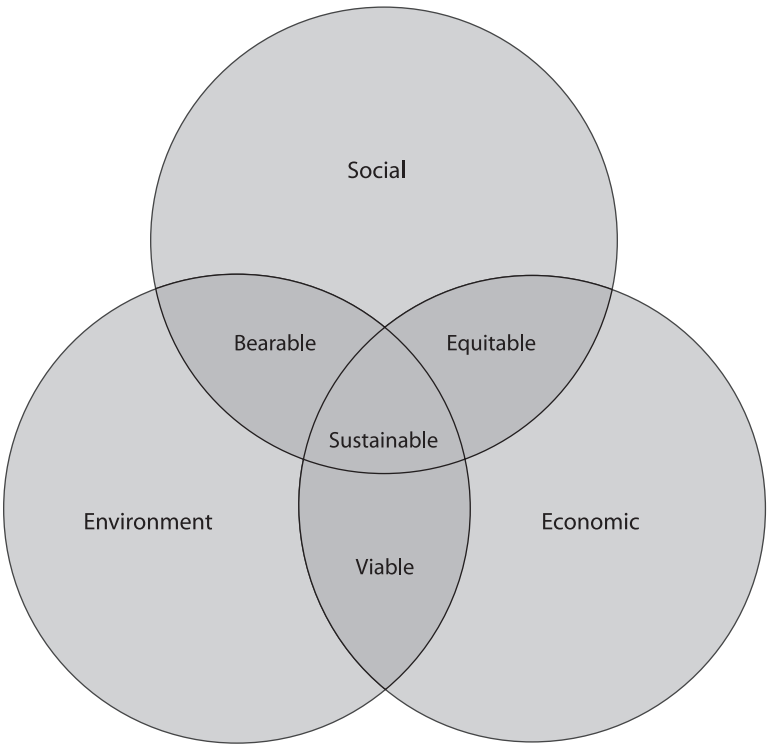

Figure 1.1 The 'triple bottom line' represented as three overlapping sectors

ideas associated with the overarching concept of sustainability articulated in the Brundtland Report are very human-centred, there is little doubt that they have put environmental issues onto other policy and practice agendas and they have also encouraged environmentalists to think more deeply about the nexus between human needs and environmental protection. As a representation of key ideas in the Brundland Report, Elkington's triple bottom line model highlights the need to balance often competing policy and practice agendas in the present. Even more challenging, however, is the call to stretch our thinking way beyond short-term political or policy cycles, or even lifetimes, in order to contemplate the legacy we are creating for the young and those yet to be born. 'Intergenerational equity' is, perhaps, a rather bland name for such a radical idea but it is an idea which is hard to ignore, whether you are a policy-maker of simply a parent.

WORKING BETWEEN THE GLOBAL AND THE LOCAL

Rio Earth Summit (1992) was a gathering initiated by the United Nations Commission on Environment and Development for heads of state, other representatives of national governments and representatives of a wide range of international and national organisations. It attracted around 17,000 delegates.

Copenhagen and Paris Climate Change summits (2009 and 2015) were part of a series of UN-sponsored global gatherings aimed at negotiating international agreements to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases. The first conference in the series was held in Kyoto in 1997.

Rio+20 was held in Rio 20 years later with more delegates but fewer heads of state in attendance.

The Brundtland Report reflected the growth of global awareness which may have triggered plans for the impressive '**Earth Summit**' held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and this probably represents the high point of global optimism about our capacity to successfully meet the challenges of global sustainability while the 2009 **Copenhagen summit on climate change** may represent a low point, before world leaders decided to act with much more resolution at the follow-up climate change **summit held in Paris** at the end of 2015. Of course, we should avoid reading too much into individual events or global developments because action needs to be both ambitious and sustained to address trends such as those reviewed in Chapters 3–5. However, there can be little doubt that the complexities associated with global climate change have undermined confidence in humanity's ability to act globally. According to the communiqué that emerged from the **Rio+20** gathering held in 2012, global humanity knows what needs to be done but lacks the 'political will' to do what is needed.

This book will confirm that global climate change is indeed a 'wicked problem' that cannot be resolved with particular, short-term, responses. Similarly, it will argue that global poverty cannot be easily 'ended' and that our growing global dependency on oil and other 'fossil fuels' is making human societies much more vulnerable to forms of collapse than we dare to imagine. It is easy for most people in the world to think that problems of this magnitude are matters for heads of state and international agencies and that there is little that individuals can do. This book will argue that this response is a form of denial because there is much that individuals can, and should, do. However, we do not encounter and interact with global systems and global change at a global level but rather at the level of daily living within localised environments. We encounter local weather rather than the global climate; we make daily decisions about our use of energy; and we interact with the global economy – and its global social consequences – in local shops and markets.

The US-based science writer **Rachel Carson** is widely acknowledged as being the mother of the modern environmental movement which began in the USA before achieving global reach and significance in the 1970s. Carson died in 1964

before witnessing the growth of the movement that she simulated but it was her cry-from-the-heart book of 1962 – *Silent Spring* – that made people realise that synthetic chemicals sprayed on crops in the USA were capable of killing fish and birds in remote locations, even outside the borders of the nation. We live in a world in which global communication technologies have largely dissolved old boundaries imposed by space and time; we can be in real-time contact with people anywhere on the planet. However, we live within local ecosystems where our environmental impacts begin before spreading through the kinds of **ecological flows** that were depicted by Carson. We need to understand both the globalisation of social systems – including the economy – and the ways in which ecological flows link local ecosystems into the **biosphere**. This book will argue that we need greater social *and* ecological literacy in order to understand the dynamic interrelationships between the local and the global.

Rachel Carson (1907–64) trained as a zoologist before becoming editor-in-chief of US Fish and Wildlife Service publications and a newspaper columnist. Before the publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962 her main publication was *The Sea Around Us* (1952).

ecological flows is a term used in this book to highlight the ways in which materials and energy flow through ecosystems at all levels for the local to the global.

biosphere is the term used to refer to the zone surrounding the planet in which living organisms can thrive. It extends from just below the surface of the planet to the part of the atmosphere which contains sufficient oxygen to sustain life.

BRINGING IN THE PERSONAL

As mentioned above, the 'triple bottom line' model introduced by John Elkington is often represented as a 'three-sector' diagram and this representation has been very influential. However, as we will see in Chapters 6 and 9, many scholars have questioned the suggestion that economic policy and practice can serve needs which are somehow outside the domain of social wellbeing and this has prompted a move to place economic thinking inside the social sphere. This line of thinking prompted the development of a 'Social Ecology' model of sustainability – used in an innovative Social Ecology teaching programme at the University of Western Sydney – which shifts economic thinking into the social sphere in order to make way for naming the 'personal' as a major sphere for acting on sustainability challenges (see Figure 1.2).

There is no need to counterpose the Social Ecology model with the triple bottom line model because the latter continues to challenge existing areas of

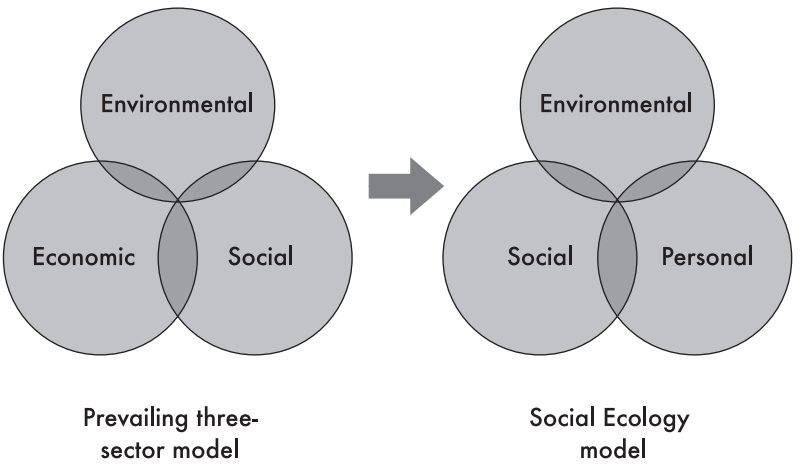

Figure 1.2 From the prevailing model to the Social Ecology model

policy and practice, as they are currently conceived. However, the Social Ecology model helps to bring the personal into view and this has strong pedagogical merit. The Social Ecology model underpins the way the introduction to sustainability course is taught at RMIT University and it has a major influence on the way this book is structured. Use of the Social Ecology model has enabled the teaching team at RMIT to focus on both the professional and personal dimensions of sustainability work. This helps to counter the assumption that sustainability is a matter for designated experts. Bringing sustainability back to the personal scale can also help to counter some of the despair we may feel when we contemplate global trends and challenges. There is always something we can do at a personal level, and personal action can lead us into broader forms of social action. At the same time, personal action can only ever be an entry point into the challenges that stretch across scales from the local to the global. Rather than enabling us to keep despair at bay, personal action takes us into the enduring battle between hope and despair, which will be further discussed in Chapters 9 and 10.

BUZZWORDS AND KEYWORDS

The concept of 'environmentally sustainable development' tends to suggest that we can have our cake and eat it too. This has prompted many reviewers – such as Hayden Washington (2015) – to argue that it has become imperative to distinguish between 'weak' and 'strong' interpretations of what 'sustainability' means. There is a danger, such scholars note, that weak interpretations of the concept can turn it into nothing more than benign policy rhetoric. In Chapters 2 and 7 we will discuss the suggestion that the concept of 'resilience' may have gained more urgency than the concept of 'sustainability'. There are plenty of commentators who feel that sustainability has lost its radical, transformational, appeal.

keywords is a term introduced by cultural theorist Raymond Williams in 1976 to refer to words in the English language which have particular significance and enduring appeal.

However, this book takes a lead from the suggestion made by pioneering cultural theorist Raymond Williams (1976) that particular words become '**keywords**' in any language partly because they are open to competing interpretations. Language can only ever provide entry points into complex human experiences, Williams argued, and 'keywords' are those which endure because they signify something of enduring importance. The author has noted that Williams picked 'community' as a keyword in English even though it can have almost opposite meanings to different people because the desire to experience community is a deep human need. This book accepts that 'sustainability' and 'resilience' have also become keywords – not buzzwords – in English even though they defy simple or one-sided definitions. Because they touch on deep and complex human experiences 'keywords' – extended to included phrases – tend to be either used uncritically or contested rather fiercely and this applies to a number of words and phrases associated with debates and discourses on 'sustainability'. For example:

- *Limits to growth* is a term that is gaining rather reluctant support although the two words 'limits' and 'growth' can both be misleading if they are used simplistically. At the global level the biosphere imposes certain limits to economic growth; limits that are being exceeded in relation to the emission of greenhouse gases. Economic growth and development are often necessary

for social wellbeing and even for environmental protection and limits are always context dependent. However, the **discourse** on limits has called into question the cherished notion that endless growth is the only thing that makes economies function.

discourse is a term used to refer to ongoing debates and dialogues on a particular topic. Contributions to a discourse can take many forms; from academic papers to public commentary and policy formulations.

- *Diversity* is a term that is used uncritically in the sense that it is generally assumed to be a good thing without questioning why. Ecologists have long understood that 'functional diversity' is needed to make particular ecosystems dynamic and adaptable but this is not diversity for its own sake but rather *enough* diversity to enhance adaptability. In this sense diversity has functional value, not just normative value and the same applies to social and cultural diversity. Taken to its extreme, diversity – as in the multiplication of difference – could undermine interdependence and community.
- *Community* is a term that is also used uncritically in the sense that it is assumed to be universal good. However, a community excludes as much as it includes and the functional value of community formation needs to be understood in particular contexts or settings. This book will argue that a sense of belonging to community is no longer a given within contemporary human societies; rather, it needs to be consciously constructed and this, in turn, poses many questions about who is included in, or excluded from, any particular community.
- *Resilience* is a term that is gaining popularity because it is widely assumed that it has more substance than the concept of 'adaptability'. Resilience – generally understood as a capacity to 'bounce back' after some kind of disturbance – implies strength as well as adaptability. However, this book will argue that prevailing discourses on 'risk management' tend to legitimise risk aversion even though a capacity to cope with risk and uncertainty are key requirements for resilient individuals and resilient systems.

RMIT SUSTAINABILITY PRINCIPLES

Even though many attempts have been made to support the broad notion of sustainability with a set of guiding principles, Chapters 2 and 6 will make it clear that there is no consensus on this matter in the relevant literature. The Brundtland Report introduced a number of terms and concepts that can be turned into principles and chief among them are the principles of intragenerational and intergenerational equity. The problem in posing a set of 'guiding principles' for sustainability is that they might be treated as a rather banal 'tick-box' exercise, yet the principles of intragenerational and intergenerational equity defy such banal consideration and they lay the foundation for a more challenging set of guiding principles. In teaching an introduction to sustainability course at RMIT University, the author has found it pedagogically useful to build a set of nine guiding principles around the foundations of intragenerational and intergenerational equity in order to mitigate against any banal interpretation of what is implied. Like 'keywords' such 'guiding principles' can have enduring significance precisely because they defy simple interpretation. They can serve as enduring guiding principles for personal or professional action *because* their provocations can never be extinguished

RMIT Sustainability Principles

1 Acknowledge interconnections at all levels within the biosphere.
2 Acknowledge that there are limits to growth.
3 Remember that prevention is better than cure.
4 Work to improve intragenerational equity.
5 Face up to the challenges of intergenerational equity.
6 Respect requisite diversity in both nature and culture.
7 Work for relocalisation with global connectedness.
8 Move from consumerism to quality-of-life goals.
9 Learn how to travel hopefully in a world of uncertainty.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

Social Ecology model of sustainability reworks the 'triple bottom line/three sectors' model in order to bring the 'personal' into view. It was introduced into a Social Ecology teaching programme at the University of Western Sydney by Professor Stuart Hill in the late 1990s.

Part I of this book reflects the way in which the introduction to sustainability course at RMIT University is run over a period of 12 teaching weeks. Chapters 8–10 reflect the use of the **Social Ecology model of sustainability** as a teaching heuristic. However, there is no simple or obvious way to break the very big topic of sustainability into a set of smaller topics for separate book chapters and other authors would have used different headings and a different sequence for the way the material is covered. Chapters 11–16 have been added in response to requests made, and feedback offered, by academics running sustainability courses in a wide range of universities in a wide range of countries. However, all the chapters aim to be relatively independent so that they can be used selectively and in different sequences. There may well be enough material in the book to support more than one course, especially if the book is used in conjunction with the companion website.

While the book relies on contributions made by a number of chapter co-authors, the selection of topics and the book structure as a whole reflect the author's personal preferences and preoccupations. This includes the decision to start with the notion of travelling hopefully – as the students begin their shared journey – and end the first sequence of chapters – i.e. Chapter 10 – with a presentation of 'arguments for hope'. This is not a shallow gesture, because the opportunity to join a global movement for sustainable living is an enticing one. It is often said that humans have a demonstrated capacity to cope well in crisis situations and rise to meet big or unexpected challenges. This will be put to the test in the challenging times that lie ahead but we might learn to focus as much on the journey – and all its emergent possibilities – as much as the destination we hope to reach.

NOTE

1 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNTw3kyQkyk

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