

## **ECOLOGICAL ECONOMICS LITE**

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**Eco-Economy: Building an Economy for the Earth.** Lester R. Brown. W. W. Norton, New York, 2001. 334 pp., \$15.95 (ISBN 0393321932 paper).

**D**r. Lester Brown founded Worldwatch Institute, and more recently the Earth Policy Institute, to facilitate the communication of environmental information to the public. This book is the 47th Brown has either authored or coauthored over the past three decades. He has consistently warned of the environmental consequences of excessive population growth: fisheries decline, forest abuse, water misuse, the multiple dangers of our fossil fuel economy, and the likelihood of grain shortages. Brown has also identified areas where we have been successful. Many countries have brought population growth under control, wind energy is proving very competitive, and "green" taxes are changing behavior. His very successful style of communication, developed with a team often working in the background, combines modest data and simple graphs, interesting commentary and vignettes, and praise for enlightened policies and key actors who are making a difference. His steady flow of accessible information has been appropriately recognized: He is the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship, the United Nations Environment Prize, and the Blue Planet Prize.

Brown's recent book, *Eco-Economy: Building an Economy for the Earth*, tackles the same issues the author has addressed for years, drawing on the arguments he and his team have long developed, updating the data, and bringing in new illustrative stories. The first chapter, "The Economy and the Earth," puts most of its emphasis on the argument that the economy must be seen as a part of the environmental system rather than vice versa. The second and third chapters document the stresses on water and biological resources, arguing that an economic transformation will be neces-

sary. In the fourth chapter, Brown proposes an outline of the directions an eco-economy would take. The next six chapters document in greater detail the need for and likely nature of transitions for energy, materials, agriculture, forests, cities, and population, respectively. These chapters provide the essential information to back up a broad understanding of where we are and how far we can go. They build on environmental, technical, and policy examples from around the world. Unfortunately, the examples are presented with surprisingly little reference to the specific cultural, political, and economic conditions from which they have sprung.

The final two chapters, in keeping with the title of the book, pay a little more attention to the systemic aspects of economic transformation. Overall, Brown argues that we need a dramatic change in mind-set to implement appropriate policies. The policies themselves, however, are quite conventional. Prices to individual users need to reflect their full environmental costs through green taxes and stronger environmental regulations. Eco-labeling will help consumers make wiser choices. For some activities and products, providing appropriate signals will prove infeasible for one reason or another, and those activities and products should simply be banned. Planners need to think ahead to the economy we will have, and we need to tackle the infrastructure now. We can keep doing what we do, but we need an overhaul of mind-set if what we do is to transform unsustainable economies into eco-economies.

In short, *Eco-Economy* is another tract by Lester Brown to inform and motivate the public. Style, however, limits substance; communicating broadly is effected at the expense of depth. The material is quite general and presented as if applicable to all economies. Heavy moral issues, beyond our collective general responsibilities to future generations, are bypassed. The dynamics of real economic and ecological systems are too complicated for smooth prose. Brown does not address how inequities between North and South might be remedied while staying within global environmental limits. He also does not address

economic globalization. Neither in the text nor in the data for individual countries does he refer to the energy, material use, and pollution embedded in goods consumed in one country but produced in another, for example. The politics of economic power are consciously avoided, while corporations that have publicly stated they are going green are given due credit, though too trustingly so. Nor does he question how we are going to manage our global environment and limited resources in an atmosphere of great mistrust, let alone violent conflict.

*Eco-Economy* offers broad evidence as to why and how our economy needs to change. It provides general background on how specific changes in certain countries have occurred. It impresses me as a good start for lay audiences and for high school seniors and college freshmen in environmental studies courses. Once motivated, however, such readers should turn their attention to richer texts.

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