

A review of "Atlas of Earthcare" by Miles Litvinoff

(Gaia Book. 1996, large format paperback)

Many readers will remember *The Gaia Atlas of Planet Management* edited by Norman Myers (1985). It was the coffee table book of the Sustainable Development lobby. It reflected growing concern that the 'smash and grab' approach to the environment was killing the very life-support systems on which all inhabitants of the Earth depend. Thus was born the idea of sustainable growth, popularised by the Brundtland Report. This contradictory term (how can one have on-going physical growth on a finite planet?) soon produced a mutation, "sustainable development". Though this was a meaningless piece of phrase-mongering, it nonetheless proved very useful since its very vagueness meant that it could mean all things to all people. Even better, it hinted that, with a bit of care, the human lot could be improved whilst caring for the Earth.

Now comes *The Atlas of Earth Care*, aimed at "young people". There is certainly a desperate need for such publications. It is one of the great myths of today that there is a coming generation of young 'greens'. In actuality, there is great ecological ignorance amongst youth and, worse, deep apathy, if not outright hostility to anything that threatens to stop them "doing their own thing". There are exceptions to this rule, mainly relating to animal rights campaigning, anti-poverty campaigns, and vegetarianism. But few teenage vegetarians could explain the ecology of food chains or know about the detrimental impacts of other aspects of their lifestyles upon other species and their habitats. Furthermore, many teenagers are afflicted by poor literacy, short attention spans and very poor general knowledge (compare children's comics of, say, forty years and those of today).

Books that might change this lamentable state of affairs are more than welcome. As a publication, this is something of a tour de force. Published in A4 format with 192 pages, it communicates its message with great skill. The typography is crisp, the pictures and graphics are equally sharp, while the overall layout guides the user effortlessly through the many issues it covers. Stylistically, the text is easy to read, yet packed full of hard information.

While books such as G. Tyler Miller's textbook *Living in the Environment* and an older generation like Marston Bates' *Forest and Sea* are characterised by greater more technical precision in their description of planetary ecology (and Bates managed to be lyrical at the same time), Litvinoff displays great skill in explaining complex ideas. The book is well tuned to its target audience, with a heavy emphasis on illustrations, interspersed with short bursts of text. In production terms, then, the author, designers and publisher deserve the highest praise.

Yet closer study raises many doubts, one which ultimately poses the question of whether the title - *Earth Care* - might breach the Trades Description Act. Suspensions are raised first by the cover. It announces that the volume is produced in association with Oxfam, an organisation which has devoted its life to spreading the stupid message that rising human numbers do not count and that there is more than enough for everyone if only the bounty were shared out fairly. Not surprisingly, the book's contents play down the realities of overpopulation, surely the last thing that something dedicated to "Earth Care" should be doing. 'Population' even rates fewer entries in the index than 'potatoes'.

Then there is a sticker stuck on my review copy, announcing that the volume has been short listed for the Rhone-Poulenc Prize for Science Books. Memory might fail me but the troubling recollection persists that this firm is the same French corporate giant, purveyors of all kinds of chemicals, in quantities and kinds incompatible with Earth care. Might this company be the same organisation as the Rhone-Poulenc, prime mover in "Enterprises Pour L'Environnement", whose main purpose to fight "rampaging dangers of environmental protection".

Presumably an Earth enemy like Rhone-Poulenc can tolerate books like this since they confine themselves to broad generalities. Social and environmental ills are discussed as if no-one really is to blame. Yet there are guilty parties and, while it is naive to put all the blame on big business, the fact remains that the whole system of 'free enterprise', not just the behaviour of specific corporations, is incompatible with human and environmental well-being. The reference to Bhopal on p83 scarcely does justice to the enormity of that crime or to the iceberg of destruction and exploitation beneath it. The section of the ozone layer similarly fails to spotlight the gaping hole in care for planetary health on part of companies like Du Pont, the World Bank and assorted

national governments. There are two pages entitled “world at war” . It makes many good points about the direct costs of warfare and the indirect losses from military preparations. But some reference might have been made to the whole military-industrial complex.

At the same time, there is no hint that ordinary people themselves might be guilty of ‘Earth Uncare’—by parenting too many offspring, by indulging in greedy consumption patterns, by demanding all kinds of technological toys. 19 pages are devoted to a section called ‘humankind’. One tiny paragraph of 9 lines in small print covers what its subheading calls “Population Explosion?” (sic - is the vast increase in human numbers a myth? is it a trivial issue?) Discussion elsewhere is couched purely in terms of human needs and entitlements, with no hint that too many people with too many rights might cripple the Earth’s life-support systems.

Now it is terribly difficult to raise such complex and controversial issues with younger audiences. Too much alarmism also can be counter-productive. Litvinoff tends to take an approach of “on the one hand, there is these drawbacks... but on the other there are those benefits”. It could be argued that this strategy avoids charges of bias and propaganda. But it might lull tomorrow’s citizens to think that only comparatively minor and indeed congenial changes are necessary in the way we live if we are to practise ‘Earth Care’.

The overall message of the book is one that suggests that a sustainable society will be not too different from our own. Within the book, we do find images of misery and suffering yet nearby are consolingly glossy illustrations depicting high tech. wonders. I suspect that most children and teenagers would deduce from the two page spread pictures of the Futuroscope (p162-163) and giant satellite dishes (p168-169) that such infrastructure are part of the answer, rather than symptoms of the problem.

The messages of other images are ambiguous. A South African landscape (p122-123) looks to this reader like a picture of substantial deforestation yet it is used to depict “traditional” childhood roles (there is a boy with oxen and plough in the foreground). Even on the cover, we see a colourful snap of a smiling family, presumably somewhere in the “South”, folk who, if the number of children in the picture is anything to go by, are clearly bent on continuing the population boom.

At an ideological level, the book sticks to the mainstream. In one or two places, the old arrogance of humanism surfaces reborn. For example, in the section on plants and animals, people are described, in a major heading, as “partners in evolution”. Such language is a long step away from the humility of Aldo Leopold’s image of homo sapiens as a ‘plain member and citizen’ of the ecological community.

In general, there is too great a gap between the essential tameness of this book and the ferocity with which the Earth is being destroyed. Yet it would be wrong to be too hard on this book. A lot of care has been lavished upon it and it does make many useful points. It certainly belongs in every school and college library.

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