

Review of Save the Earth

Edited by Jonathon Porritt (Dorling Kindersley, 1991)

The world faces a crisis greater than that represented by World War II. For all the death and destruction caused by that terrible conflict, society recovered with remarkable speed. By contrast, if the current trends in resource depletion, pollution and environmental degradation are not reversed, then humanity will reach at some time in the not-so-distant future the point at which its decline will become irreversible.

The rising tide of 'environmental' refugees suggests that many human communities are already in a critical condition. For a rapidly increasing number of non-human species, the crunch has already arrived such are the catastrophic daily losses in biodiversity. Alarm is not confined, however, to more radical groups on the fringes of society. Amongst ruling elites such as top industrialists, the political establishment, high-ranking academics and scientists, there is a growing sense that the 'smash and grab' approach to the environment is killing the very life-support systems on which all inhabitants of the Earth depend.

Save The Earth is a testimony to that width and depth of concern. Its editor, Jonathon Porritt, has assembled a mass of contributions from the famous and not-so-famous. Diplomats rub shoulders with scientists, politicians with pop stars. Despite the fact that some of the contributions are a bit repetitive and others devoid of substance, there is still a substantial core of great value, not least Porritt's own input which is first-class. The book confirms his status as an activist of international stature.

A great many people cannot see why there are so many different parties and pressure groups proclaiming themselves friends of the earth. It seems so obvious that we should unite behind one common banner since we are all afraid of the same danger. This book will appeal to such sentiments since its goal is clearly one of maximum unity.

Though Porritt the Activist no doubt knows that the track record of decision-makers at all levels falls far short of what is required, Porritt the Editor has concluded that too much alarmism is counter-productive. This too will widen the book's appeal for there are many who will welcome reassurance that something is being done to avoid ecological melt-down. The message of *Save the Earth* is one of hope. Not only is there still time but action is now being taken today to ensure that there will be many tomorrows. Though the dangers are very well documented, doom and gloom are cast into the shadows by a radiant optimism. David Attenborough's introduction, for example, is a depressing example of how people keep up their spirits by clutching at straws.

There is, however, plenty of evidence that the 'softly, softly' approach to the mobilisation of public support may have its own dangers as the public is lulled into a false sense of security. People are all too willing to believe only comparatively minor and indeed congenial changes are necessary in the way we live.

To swell the ranks of Porritt's Popular Front, recruitment seems to have been based upon the lowest common denominator. The price paid is a blurring of the issues. When it comes to describing the sickness, it is easy to agree. Diagnosis and prescription are another matter. Although *Save The Earth* describes what it calls a series of 'timebombs', it cannot bring itself to spell out clearly and simply that the defusing of these dangers depends upon the renunciation of all kinds of things that people now take for granted or expect to be theirs as of right.

The work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climatic Change, for example, suggests that the inhabitants of the richer countries in particular will have to accept quite dramatic changes in their lifestyles if we are to halt global warming... and this is only one of many symptoms of a rapidly sickening planet. This last year, for example, has brought news that the depletion of the ozone layer is much worse than was previously thought yet we will continue to spew out ozone-deleting chemicals for several years before their production is halted. Even if these two problems were to evaporate miraculously, there would remain enough other ones to suggest human society has reached the point of overshoot.

The key issue is the abandonment of the whole 'growth' ethic itself but this is not a message that, we suspect, will not appeal to some of the contributors to 'Save the Earth'. Barry Commoner and Gro Harlem Brundtland, for example, have been leading ideologues of the 'good growth' perspective while others such as the businessman Richard Branson are not known for their adherence to 'steady-state' economics and simple living.

Similarly, organisations such as UNEP have clung like limpets to the notion that we can have our environmental cake and eat it by a variety of sticking plaster measures - more impact assessment and monitoring, more catalytic converters and other gadgetry, market reforms such as pollution charges etc. Such proposals pop up throughout the book. It does face the issue of land reform but only when discussing countries a long way from its home base where inequalities in wealth and power are somewhat ignored. Despite some excellent observations to the contrary in the sections by Porritt himself ('beware the green technofix' etc), the overall message of the book is one that suggests that a sustainable society will be not too different from our own.

For a start, the book is physically yet another product off the luxurious goods production lines of the rich countries. Within, we do find shocking images of misery and suffering yet nearby are consolingly glossy pictures of optical fibres, magnetic levitation trains, superconducting ceramics, and tidal barrages. This cautiously radical message is reinforced by some, though, it must be stressed, not all, sections of the text itself.

We are told on page 23, for example, about the 'clean chip'. Yet microchip manufacture involves many toxic liquids and fumes, causing serious water pollution in places such as California's Silicon Valley. Furthermore, although the silicon used to make microchips might be 'one of the Earth's most abundant elements', the mass manufacture, retailing, use and (rapid) discarding of computers cannot take place without considerable quantities of energy and raw materials. The resource savings promised as a result of computerisation, namely the advent of the paperless office, have failed to materialise. The computer has however saved one resource - the people who have been automated out of employment. Computerisation (aided and abetted by rapidly developing electronic imaging technologies) has brought new stresses, instabilities and vulnerabilities to most aspects of contemporary life. Last but not least, these are not neutral tools...they change their users' perceptions of reality in ways highly inappropriate to a truly ecologically sensibility.

The failure to make a decisive break with the dominant values of the past 300 years, not least those concerning individual autonomy, is reflected more generally in the way many sections of the book define the problem under discussion. They see solutions in terms of the search for new ways satisfying human demands, rather than setting limits to them. For this reason the otherwise

excellent chapter on 'crunching numbers' is unable to propose policies commensurate to the crisis of overpopulation it describes. Similarly a special feature on p85 describes the 'plight of the Alps' but cannot face the reality that the future of Alpine ecosystems depends on a limit being set to the amount of skiing facilities, hydroelectric dams and indeed all further human encroachments. Last but not least, the chapter on air pollution meekly concludes with a call for 'new technology' even though the data presented clearly suggests that people are going to have to accept reduced mobility regardless of specific improvements to the present mix of transport systems.

Even at an ideological level, the book's contributors generally avoid straying too far down the deeper paths signposted by ecophilosophers such as Arne Naess. In some places, the old arrogance of humanism surfaces reborn, for example, in the contribution from Edgar Morin, who calls upon humanity to act 'as Nature's co-pilot' (p107). The practical consequences can be sampled on p73 where we are told that genetic engineering 'will widen the reach of our great-grandchildren, enabling them to put together altered kinds of organisms'(!). It 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.

Furthermore, *Save the Earth* is often vague about the causes of our problems. The ecological crisis has not come about all of its own accord - it is the product of identifiable factors. It is crucial that they are addressed to make sure that the danger does not reoccur. Mention has been made already, for example, of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climatic Change. Omitted in the book's discussion of global warming is the fact that the Panel's work is being opposed at every step by the so-called Climate Council, a body uniting oil, coal and other corporate interests who have no intention of letting their profits suffer in the cause of ecological sanity. The same people vociferously and successfully whipped up opposition to the 'Big Green' package of legislative action when it was put to the Californian electorate. The existence and structure of the military-industrial complex receives only cursory treatment. This is rather amazing since, for example, the American armed forces are that nation's largest single institutional consumer of energy and therefore a significant contributor to the greenhouse effect as well as to a myriad of other environmental, economic and social problems.

Vested interests are however not the only barrier. Amongst the public at large, there are many signs of apathy, ignorance and hostility to the kind of measures that will be necessary to save the Earth. In Holland, for example, where even government ministers concede that their country is fast reaching catastrophic levels of air, water and soil pollution, the Dutch public still seems unwilling to support the radical change in lifestyles needed to avoid this fate. The down side of the pursuit of consensus in *Save the Earth* is that it casts a veil over what is a deep crisis in public consciousness.

The ecological reckoning will catch up with all kinds of groups. The so-called World Development Movement and many aid agencies such as Oxfam, for example, have many positive achievements to their credit. Their failure, however, to face the issue of overpopulation undermines this good work. Here again, the price of unity in *Save the Earth* is impotence since there is no critique of the stance of such organisations. The born-again growthism of the Brundtland Report does have a number of question marks put against it but the necessary conclusions are not fully drawn. On p39, we are told rightly that 'basic issues of equity and per capita consumption' must be 'far more honestly addressed by the

affluent nations of the North' yet there is no suggestion of what this might mean in practice. Certainly there are very few contributors to *Save the Earth* who use their allotted space to examine what the ecological crisis will mean for individual lifestyles. For example, how many have questioned their own inter-continental jet-setting?

The alternative to consensus at all costs is not sectarian isolation. It is possible to work together for goals of mutual interest, whilst retaining independence and identity, criticising as and when necessary. The movement against nuclear defence policies brought together people who were for and against civil nuclear energy programmes. In other words, it was a united front that did not sweep differences under one common carpet.

One last problem with this book is not its message but rather the medium itself. Dorling Kindersley have published some excellent books yet they suffer from what might be called the MacDonald's syndrome in which the linear argument is sacrificed in favour of a buffet of tasty titbits. *Save the Earth* thus divides much of its content into boxes of every shape and size. This fragments the overall picture, with the risk that readers only sample the more palatable morsels. The force of the book's message is thereby compromised. Ironically, Jonathon Porritt has produced simultaneously another book, 'Captain Eco', this time aimed at children. It is in a cartoon format but, not only is it easier to follow, its message is also surprisingly sharper and deeper.