

Alternatives Journal

CANADIAN ENVIRONMENTAL IDEAS & ACTION

[About us](#) [Journal issues](#) [Subscription orders](#) [Reviews](#) [Resources](#) [Contributing](#) [Advertising](#) [Support us](#) [Contact us](#)

News Desk

CANADIAN NEWS
GLOBAL NEWS
CAMPAIGNS
RESEARCH FINDINGS

Out of the Woods

Summer 2004
 Volume 30, Number 3
 Table of contents

Search

[Search the Web](#) [Search Alternatives](#)

Follow up

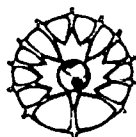
Click on "Follow up" for web links from the current issue of Alternatives Journal

[E-mail this Article](#)

[Print this Article](#)

At the Edge: Sustainable Development in the 21st Century, Ann Dale, Vancouver and Toronto: University of British Columbia Press, 2001.

Reviewed by Jean-Guy Vaillancourt



ESAC-ACÉC
 Alternatives is the official journal of Canada's green learned society, the Environmental Studies Association of Canada.

Contact Us:

Alternatives Journal
 Faculty of Environmental Studies
 University of Waterloo
 Waterloo, Ontario N2L 3G1
 Canada

phone: (519) 888-4442
toll free: (866) 437-2587
fax: (519) 746-0292
email:
info@alternativesjournal.ca
web:
www.alternativesjournal.ca

This is the sixth volume of the Sustainability and Environment series published by the University of British Columbia Press. Ann Dale rightly believes that sustainable development is one of the greatest challenges of the 21st century. Its three interconnected imperatives (ecological, economic and social) require both an intense individual involvement and effective governmental leadership at all levels. She is convinced that sustainable development offers the best chance of reconciling nature and society in the face of the continuing deterioration of the environment.

Fundamentally, this book is about human values, particularly the core values of respect for all living beings. She is concerned with reconciling intellect, emotions and spirituality on the one hand, as well as compassion, praxis and dialogue on the other. Methodologically, the book relies on a systems approach, on dialectical thinking, and on the use of electronic media collaboration.

In fact, a lot of the material in the book comes from the electronic dialogue established between Dale and co-researchers from the public sector, the academic world and NGOs. She strongly believes that governance must begin to accept the notion of strong civil societies as communities of learning. She fears that we are fast approaching the global carrying capacity of the Earth. Sustainable development, with its three necessary and overlapping imperatives, is the only acceptable way to go. Priority, in sum, must be given not only to values, but also to interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity and to a systems approach.

Several chapters look at the global context of each of these imperatives. Today, the ecological imperative has to do mostly with biodiversity, climate change, natural resources (i.e. ecological capital and services) and ecosystem dynamics. Some of the social imperatives considered by Dale are poverty, gender inequality, increasing population, public health, urban crowding, loss of social capital, violence and crime, defence spending and other similar social pathologies. As for economic imperatives, Dale calls for a paradigm shift towards steady-state economics. The gap between rich and poor is growing,

but the economy itself is not really growing because natural capital is rapidly being depleted. Fishing, fossil fuel extraction, forestry, mining and the armament industry especially, are subsidised as they destroy resources. We are spending more to promote global warming and acid rain than to reduce it.

The author stresses the need to develop an efficiency-substitution-redesign framework, a three-stage approach intended to foster the transition to sustainable development. Industrial ecology and the dematerialisation of the economy will help save resources, especially energy, and sustainable development can be fostered by elimination of perverse subsidies, the use of green taxes and incentives, and a basic income scheme.

Chapter 7, curiously entitled "Solitudes, Silos and Stovepipes," examines the cognitive barriers that inhibit effective action by the federal government bureaucracies in Canada. Political paralysis is brought about by dualistic thinking, the dominance of uncritical theories and models and too much emphasis on technology, centralization and privatization. Incrementalism and trial-and-error unfortunately are still the normal way of functioning. NGOs, universities and governments work in parallel, each in its own solitude, like silos and stovepipes that rarely connect horizontally. Sustainable development requires integrated and comprehensive decision-making, consensus, and coalitions to promote common action.

Chapter 8, "Reconciliation," is a collage of numerous interventions by Dale's electronic co-researchers on principles for human activity systems derived from ecological systems. Such a reconciliation framework, based on the integration of ecological, economic and social imperatives, is founded on the merging of formerly competing interests. It also depends on democracy, equity, humility, transparency and mutuality, since sustainable development is mainly about values, ecological literacy, consensus building and dialogue.

In the last chapter, Dale applies her approach to the Atlantic cod fishery collapse. She believes that the creation of a transdisciplinary network of dialogue and collaboration to foster greater civic engagement could have counter-balanced the vested interests that brought about this disaster. Democratic governance, in her view, depends on the strength of civil society, on the creation of communities of knowledge, and the establishment of transdisciplinary networks of reciprocity.

In my view, Dale puts a little too much emphasis on certain emergent alternative ideas and paradigms like postmodernism, postnormal science and deep ecology, and on the co-evolutionary relationships between human systems and natural systems. On the other hand, one of the very touching aspects of this book is the way she weaves together the devastating and unfathomable personal and emotional trauma of losing her beloved young son Danny. Her vision of what sustainable development and policy alternatives should be all about is also stimulating and interesting. Reading this book is a moving, regenerative experience. The academic, government and private sectors need more of the kind of knowledge, sensitivity and wisdom expressed openly and cordially in this beautiful and learned book.

Jean-Guy Vaillancourt teaches in the Department of Sociology at Université de Montréal.

Refer a friend to this article

Your Name: _____