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Books

Science-based and beautifully illustrated book reminds us ‘there is no Planet B’

Author: [Nancy Lord](#) | Alaska books

Oasis Earth: Planet in Peril

By Rick Steiner. Cirque Press, 2020. 240 pages. \$35 as large paperback, \$5 Kindle, or free download at the author's [website](#).

Scientists agree that we are stretching the Earth's ecosystem capabilities beyond the breaking point and face a disastrous future. Rick Steiner, a conservation biologist and retired professor from the University of Alaska, has been consulting internationally on related issues for decades and has now brought together a fact-based and impassioned plea to change our path and save the world.

For years now, there have been multitudes of books, documentaries, presentations, and warnings about climate change in particular but, beyond that, the destructive practices that have led to enormous landscape changes, extinctions, and pollution. These do not make for happy reading or viewing, and are too often dismissed as “doom-and-gloom” scenarios that people avoid.

Do we need one more book to bring us the news? Yes, if the book is “Oasis Earth.” Steiner has combined in one volume a succinct and up-to-date summary of our global environmental situation along with a well-formulated examination of solutions. The text is easily read and comprehended. Throughout, it's seeded with hundreds of quotations from past and present scientists, economists, philosophers, astronauts, naturalists, and world leaders. It also makes generous use of bulleted lists to organize subject matter and facts.

A text-heavy book on such a weighty subject might be difficult to approach, but Steiner wisely chose to include a showcase of color photographs, gathered from around the world and displayed on every page. This book could satisfy as a photo album alone, inspiring readers with the beauty and diversity of the world even as it also presents heartbreaking scenes of drought and children picking through electronic waste.

Early on, Steiner outlines the responses we have as humans to what is known as our “ecopsychological angst.” The first three are denial (it’s not happening), indifference (I just don’t care, or I’m too busy trying to survive to worry about the future), and fatalism (it’s already too late, there’s no hope.) The fourth Steiner calls “constructive engagement/problem solving.” That is, do everything possible to redirect our course before it’s too late. We have, Steiner argues, one decade left to try to secure a sustainable future; he calls 2020 to 2030 the “breakdown or breakthrough decade.” He reminds us, “in crisis lies opportunity.”

The author, while rigorous in his reliance on science, does not hold back his dire analysis. “If current environmental trends continue, the planet will be virtually unlivable for humans and perhaps half of all other species by 2050, certainly by 2100. For many people and other species, in many places, it already is. We are a civilization in collapse, and we are destroying much of the biosphere on our way down.”

The three sections of the book are sub-titled “Paradise,” “Paradise Lost” and “Paradise Restored.” The first covers basic science about the origin of the universe and Earth, the development of life, mass extinctions, human evolution, and the role of science in exploring and explaining the many mysteries of life on Earth. The second discusses the many ways in which humans have contributed to ecological collapse, from resource depletion to altering the climate; this section also discusses roots of these problems in economic disparities, conflict and war, and failed states.

The third section, focused on restoration and sustainability, is the much-needed solutions offering.

That third section first provides an overview of the many sectors that have roles in contributing to solutions, in taking transformative action. Government at every level, Steiner argues, must lead, and that leadership must result in restructuring the global economy, refocusing policy from growth to stability, stabilizing population, and protecting habitat. He discusses the benefits and political realities of transitioning from a “brown” to a “green” economy, redefining what we mean by progress, and involving citizens’ councils and international agreements.

When he gets to environmental goals, Steiner leads off with a discussion of population, one of the major threats to sustainability as well as “a controversial subject in international conversation.” Earlier in the book, he points out that just in the last century world population increased four-fold and continues to rise, with projections of 10 billion by 2050. Studies, meanwhile, estimate that the Earth can sustainably support between one and two billion people. As necessary international actions, Steiner highlights funding and access for non-coercive family planning and reproductive health programs, education and literacy, and paid employment for women.

Other goals in this section call for “doing more and better with less” regarding the use of natural resources, protecting biodiversity, halting deforestation, transitioning agriculture to a sustainable basis, conserving fresh water, and reducing carbon emissions well beyond the existing Paris agreements. For oceans, the goals include eliminating pollution, reducing marine harvest to sustainable levels, and expanding protected areas. The author backs up all goals with data and specific actions.

These goals can be reached, Steiner says, if we, the people, insist that our governments and institutions do what they know needs to be done, and act now. “Science has done its job,” he writes. “Now it is time for policymakers to do theirs by applying the science and taking immediate action to solve the crisis.”

Can we survive the age now referred to as the Anthropocene? The Earth itself will go on, Steiner assures us, but whether *Homo sapiens* will be aboard and enjoying the ride will be up to us.

About this Author

Nancy Lord

Nancy Lord is a Homer-based writer and former Alaska writer laureate. Her books include "Fishcamp," "Beluga Days," and "Early Warming." Her latest book is "pH: A Novel."