

## **At the edge or already at the bottom of the cliff in a heap?**

A review of:

Dale, A., & Hill, S. B. (2001). *At the edge: sustainable development in the 21st century*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

Reviewer: Dan Kellar, beingthechange.ca

Ann Dale's *at the edge* is a slap in the face wake-up call to any planning agency, government, or policy maker world-wide. This rings especially true for her homeland Canada which has so much natural capital to manage, develop and unfortunately, lose. She has managed to critique many of the current models of development, and offer her years of experience to explain which models do or do not work, and why that is so.

The book's preface sets the tone for the book. It introduces Dale's views on the current state of 'sustainable development' and quickly describes the problems humans face when trying to balance the ecological, social and economic aspects of development. Dale puts forth a tone of immediacy and the requirement for a social change in the way humans view their surroundings. The book appears well researched; using many sources of available data while offering divergent perspectives on all the issues addressed.

A strong method Ann Dale employed while presenting her arguments was the use of quotes from her research team's electronic dialogue or from other researchers which were inserted into her text in a highlighted box. A quote would also start off each new chapter and set the chapters tone. Perhaps the best example of this was chapter 5 (which deals with the social imperatives of development); the quote not only set the tone for the chapter but matched the tone in the book; one calling for collaboration of the world's organizations to solve the problems that we are imposing on ourselves through unsustainable development.

In chapter 1 a history of sustainable development is presented including brief summaries of past conferences, reports and agreements dealing with sustainable development and speaks of the methods employed in the research of the book. She speaks of the restraints of collaborative research in effect telling the reader how her research had weaknesses. This was an important addition from a book that demands transparency, co-operation, and respect be considered as integral parts of research for methods, strategies and paradigms to solve the world's developmental problems.

At times (especially the final chapter) the book became very personal and went off topic into ideas that had little to do with the theory or practice of development. At these times the true passion of the author came out and it showed the reader just how deeply Mrs. Dale cared for the subject at hand. We can see this in chapter 11 when she is discussing her struggles with grief while researching and writing this book and in chapter 2 when she is critiquing the dominant paradigms influencing society's behaviour. She is quite harsh in her review of dualism and the exploitist model, while only giving her more preferred, currently used, models barely passing grades. At each step she calls for all governments, NGOs, industries and citizens to learn of the destruction being inflicted to the ecological systems which sustain life. Changes are urged to ensure we will be able to pay back the ecological loan that future generations have credited to us.

Chapter 3 introduces the ecological, social and economic imperatives of sustainable development that chapters 4, 5, and 6 discuss thoroughly. The chapter also defines sustainable development and has a graph plotting human activity systems relative to natural systems (fig 3.1) which she brings up in future chapters. This chapter indicates

that Dale believes we are approaching the earth's carrying capacity and that we can not rely on future technological breakthroughs for salvation. A societal change is urged.

Chapters 4-6 describe the impacts our current development models have on the ecological, social, and economic systems that we rely on. Dale argues that the positive feedback loops that we have developed urging unchecked growth will lead to the collapse of all three of these systems. She views the systems as intricately linked and writes what we do to one system will affect the other two in obvious and subtle ways. These chapters are truly the backbone of this book as they explain the links between the systems and allow the future chapters to discuss the solutions to the problems.

Chapter 7 outlines the problems in developing any dissenting thoughts to the current paradigms due to political paralysis, bureaucratic gridlock, and institutional incapacities. Dale states integrated approaches to solve the problems, many of which have started being practiced (such as interdisciplinary approaches to problem solving).

Chapters 8-10 discuss various methods on improving the sustainable development framework. Dale describes many different methods for decision making as well as her reconciliation framework which will transcend the dominant paradigms discussed earlier and will set the tone for a cross-governmental decision making process; a process Dale claims is lacking. Again co-operation in problem solving is stressed along with her conclusions that a restructuring of government would be required for her framework to be comprehensively instituted. A case-study that explains the failures of the current system is presented followed by a description of what Dale advocates to avoid the failures. This was an interesting technique that illustrated the problems of the current method of governance. Dale concludes that along with her framework a more compassionate human may be the first requirement for truly sustainable development. If people do not care about their environment, they will be less likely to understand how it works.