

Cents and Sustainability: Securing our Economic Future by Decoupling Economic Growth from Environmental Pressures

Michael H. Smith, Karlson 'Charlie' Hargroves
and Cheryl Desha

Earthscan Press, London (2010)

416 pp., £49.50

ISBN: 9781844075294

This interesting and energetic book describes the challenge addressed in its title – it provides an analysis of some aspects of environmental security, describes how governments have linked the costs of 'going green' with economics, identifies the reasons why poorer nations will have trouble unlinking the two and shows how 'decoupling' can work. The authors of the book have acknowledged help in a few of the chapters, but the lion's share of the work is their own.

The first of several forewords and introductions is provided by the formidable Gro Brundtland, a woman with a considerable stature and track record in caring for both populations and their common environments. The introduction sketches out the warnings about climate change, which have been circulated for over 20 years, reiterating the need for recognition that this is a shared problem that we all have a responsibility to address, and that addressing it could bring about great benefits to health and wealth. In many ways, the book is a call for action, particularly during recession, to move towards an environmentally and socially sustainable future, considering that taking pressure off our common environment could be economically rewarding.

The first chapters provide a collection of writings that powerfully summarise the ways in which the world's climates are changing, what 'decoupling' is and how it can contribute to a national economy, how efforts to disentangle this current interdependence can be systematically blocked, and why this might be harder to achieve in less wealthy countries, along with some useful policy analysis. The second part of the book is about decoupling in the contexts of climate change, greenhouse gasses (hooray, somebody has remembered them!), biodiversity and ecosystem resilience, freshwater provision, waste production and air quality (with air pollution in Delhi presented as a case study). Much of the decoupling work is presented in 'chapter-ettes', short sections on different aspects of the overall topic. For example, the chapter on 'Decoupling economic growth from freshwater extraction' has sections on freshwater extraction and use, economic benefits of freshwater consumption, freshwater extraction for grazing, freshwater extraction for cropping (including the selection and rotation of crop species, sub-surface drip irrigation and irrigation scheduling, advanced deficit irrigation strategies, rainwater harvesting, use of stormwater and recycling of water), decoupling industry from freshwater use and economic growth from freshwater use in cities. This book is information-dense!

Understanding 'decoupling' is key to this book. For a long time it has been taken-for-granted wisdom that economic growth is linked with resource consumption and, to a large extent, cannot occur without it. This largely underpins the arguments the Australian Federal and State governments use when justifying

doing little about environmental pollution and degradation, and attempts to legislate for carbon trading and/or taxing as a solution. Although these issues are too local and specific to be included in this book, the interesting technology of carbon sequestration does make several appearances. Many other available options for dealing with waste, in terms of greenhouse gas emissions and other hard waste emissions are summarised and the possible consequences of these are discussed. For example, if waste reduction strategies are too expensive, the economic consequences could have social consequences. In contrast, buy-back schemes at commodity end-of-life have economic and environmental potential. 'Decoupling' is the term used for actively using strategies for trade that do not assume growth is inevitably linked to resource consumption and which seek ways of engaging in the following: generating renewable resources (enhance production while controlling growth); finding substitute resources for those that are not renewable (only using coal or oil where there is work towards renewable resources for when the resources are depleted to uneconomic or extinct levels); maintaining concentrations of substances in the environment below the level at which assimilation affects environmental and human health; and avoiding irreversible damage to ecosystems.

Some of the underpinning philosophy provides room for discussion. For example, while climate change deniers would not agree, most people who read widely know that expert scientists in this area believe that we are entering a critical period of climate change. On the other hand, the use of words such as 'unprecedented' needs care, as there clearly have been huge environmental upheavals in the past – not only man-made.

The book includes a plethora of examples, and some great tables and figures. It would make a great public health teaching resource (especially if linked to the NTEP website, see below), and could be used in various subjects including environmental health, economics, finance and development studies, and also has some applications for public health law.

The authors of this book are Australian, from Griffith University and the Australian National University. They work for The Natural Edge Project (TNEP), 'a sustainable development think-tank which operates as a collaborative partnership for research, education, and policy development on innovation for sustainable development'. You can visit TNEP at <http://www.naturaledgeproject.net/>.

Priscilla Robinson
School of Public Health
Faculty of Health Sciences
La Trobe University
Melbourne