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'Ten Billion' a scary tale on population

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“Ten Billion,” by Stephen Emmott. New York: Vintage Books (Random House), 2013, 216 pages, \$12.95.

“There are now more than seven billion of us on Earth,” Stephen Emmott writes near the beginning of his new book, “Ten Billion,” a primer on the implications of the tremendous population growth our planet has recently experienced.

“As our numbers continue to grow, we continue to increase our need for far more water, far more food, far more land, far more transportation, and far more energy,” he explains. “We need to take a closer look at what’s happening right now – today – with this highly interconnected system that we rely upon, and which we are rapidly changing. Because doing so is critical to understanding where we are heading.”

“Ten Billion” is not a traditional book by any stretch of the imagination. Although Emmott’s treatise on the future of humankind is full of facts, figures, illustrations and graphs,

hardly anything he cites is referenced in a scholarly sense. There are no formal chapters, and some pages contain only one or two lines. The end result is something that reads more like a pamphlet than the cautionary tale it is intended to be.

“Every which way you look at it, a planet of 10 billion looks like a nightmare,” Emmott continues. “And even more worryingly, there is now compelling evidence that entire global ecosystems are not only capable of suffering a catastrophic tipping point, but are already approaching such a transition.”

Emmott is a professor of computational science at the University of Oxford and a visiting professor of intelligent systems at University College London. A Distinguished Fellow of the National Endowment for Science, Technology and the Arts, he has a bachelor’s degree in experimental psychology from the University of York and a doctorate in computational neuroscience from the University of Stirling. After completing postdoctoral work at Bell Labs in the early 1990s, he served as director and chief scientist for the Advanced Research Laboratory at NCR Corp. until assuming his current post as head of Microsoft Research’s Computational Science Laboratory in Cambridge, England. This is his first book.

“Ten Billion” is an effort to draw more attention to the inevitable consequences of our current trajectory as a species. No one argues the challenges that lie ahead are not monumental. Indeed, even a cursory glance at the current trends can be alarming.

What Emmott's book lacks, however, is a realistic vision and roadmap for what should be done about the problems he so eloquently and concisely defines. It's one thing to show actions have consequences; it's quite another to provide a workable plan for dealing with those consequences. The closest he comes to offering viable options for resolving the dilemmas we now face involve technology and behavior change. I tend to agree, although it could be argued that you don't have to be a rocket surgeon to come to a similar conclusion.

It would be difficult to argue that our ultimate survival is not intrinsically linked to technology in a myriad of ways – it has permeated almost every aspect of our existence for the last 500 years. Look at how our lives have been irrevocably altered by the innovations we've witnessed in personal communication over the last 20 years. Technology has been a key player in precipitating the challenges we currently face; technology will no doubt play a similar role in successfully negotiating those challenges.

At the same time, any strategy involving behavior change on a mass scale is destined to be immensely difficult. The simple truth is that most human beings will not change their behavior, individually or collectively, unless substantial pain is involved – and I am not convinced we have reached the necessary threshold for most people. Until more human beings personally experience the kinds of detrimental repercussions Emmott is describing, there is very little chance they will be motivated to make meaningful changes in their lives.

It should also be noted that not everyone shares the author's pessimistic view of our impending fate. For example, this is what Chris Goodall had to say about "Ten Billion" in the Guardian Environment Network: "Although any attempt to increase mankind's alarm at the threat from climate change is welcome, Emmott's book is error-strewn, full of careless exaggeration and weak on basic science. Its reliance on random facts pulled from the Internet is truly shocking and it will harm the cause of environmental protection. It is little more than a PowerPoint presentation turned into a slim paperback."

To be fair, some of the information presented in "Ten Billion" proved especially enlightening, particularly in light of what we are used to hearing from the more established authorities. Witness the following: "The term 'peak oil' is an increasingly familiar one. It refers to the point at which maximum rate of oil extraction is reached, beyond which it starts to decline. The generally accepted claim is that we've reached peak oil – and that we're headed for a global energy crisis soon, as we run out of oil and gas. But it is almost certainly not true. There are enormous reserves of 'proven' oil and gas. And every year, we are discovering significant new oil and gas deposits, from Brazil to the Arctic. So I'm not worried about running out of oil and gas. I'm worried that we're going to continue using them."

Despite its obvious shortcomings, I did find "Ten Billion" to be a good read. I was able to get through the entire book in one sitting; as alluded to previously, it is a relatively concise work – perhaps 15,000 words total. So if you have a couple of hours to spare, and want to be scared out of your wits, pick up a copy of "Ten Billion." You won't be disappointed.

— Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.