

Lappé makes complex topic easy in 'Diet'

Challenged to name the human factors that promote climate change, we typically picture industrial smokestacks or oil-thirsty planes and automobiles, not Pop-Tarts or pork chops. Yet the global system producing and distributing food – from seed to plate to landfill – likely accounts for thirty-one percent or more of the human-caused global warming effect.”

So begins “Diet for a Hot Planet: The Climate Crisis at the End of Your Fork and What You Can Do About It,” the new book by Anna Lappé, a senior fellow with the Oakland Institute, a policy think tank in California. The author has degrees from Brown and Columbia universities and has collaborated on two previous best-sellers on the same general topic. She frequently contributes to the

Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times as well as hosts shows on PBS, MSN and the Sundance Channel.

“Diet” consists of 11 chapters and a conclusion arranged in four major sections: “Crisis,” “Spin,” “Hope” and “Action.” Although focused ostensibly on the food industry, Lappé does an outstanding job of covering all the bases that tend to be germane to any discussion of global climate change.

“As more of us have become aware of the climate crisis and its ramifications for life as we know it,” Lappé writes, “we have come to understand that the future will bring even greater weather extremes. Virtually every new report paints a more dire picture.”

The quality of Lappé’s research is relatively self-evident and rein-

forced by 30 pages of notes and references. She takes great care to ensure that every statement she makes is evidence-based and that the implications she draws are intrinsically defensible.

An intriguing and somewhat unique feature she includes is a brief “How to Read this Book” prologue. Here she encourages readers to provide their reactions to the book – i.e., “suggestions, corrections, or ideas” – by visiting the companion website at www.takeabite.cc.

Lappé admits up front that she is not a scientist, although this denial tends to be discounted the further one gets into “Diet.” She is one of those rare writers who are able to decipher complex ideas and translate them into a form that is understandable to anyone with minimal exposure to the concepts and principles that form the foundation of her work.

One of the more appealing aspects of the book is the fact that Lappé does not spend all of her time describing the extent of the problems she is addressing. She always follows criticisms with suggested resolutions. In a particularly engrossing dissection of modern farming methods, for example, Lappé is appropriately cautionary in her assessment of the unintended consequences of these practices.

“As a result of industrial farms’ degraded soils, we’re now losing topsoil in the United States ten times faster than nature is making it,” she observes. “As soils are depleted, stored carbon is released as carbon dioxide. An estimated half of all nitrogen fertilizer applied to cornfields in the United States is not even taken up by the crop. It is lost through nitrate conversion into gas, by leaching into the soil and our waterways.”

And what has been the result of this kind of presumably beneficial manipulation by the agricultural sector? “Farmers’ yields went up, increasing supply, which has pushed prices down,” Lappé explains, “so farmers have had to produce still more just to scrape

by.”

Chapter 7, “Myth-Informed: Answering the Critics,” is an especially interesting read that deals with many of the ill-informed perceptions we often hear carelessly thrown around by pundits and even a few academics. These include the notion that we must choose between forests and farms and the idea that sustainability is counterproductive to prosperity.

Lappé draws from several different disciplines that are interrelated in ways not immediately evident to the reader. As a result, she paints a much more multidimensional picture than many of her contemporaries who are attempting to broach the same subject matter. Lappé is environmentally conscious, but she is also fully cognizant of the greater context and how the average person is affected by the current way we bring food to the table on a historically unprecedented scale.

In Chapter 10, “Eat the Sky: Seven Principles of a Climate-Friendly Diet,” Lappé is arguably at her best as she lays out a comprehensive plan for constructively dealing with the issues and concerns introduced in the earlier sections of the book. Specifically, she outlines what we can do – locally as well as globally – to better ensure that we will all have healthy foods to eat in the coming decades. These recommendations emphasize the importance of greater dependence on local producers, developing more organic alternatives, and insisting on greater truth in advertising.

In the final analysis, Lappé is an optimist who is convinced that we have the capacity to effectively deal with the immense challenges she describes in such rich detail. If you read only one book about the impact of climate change on our overall way of life, you could do a lot worse than “Diet for a Hot Planet.”

Bon appétit.

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