

# Brown tackles environmental issues in 'World on the Edge'

Saving civilization is not a spectator sport."

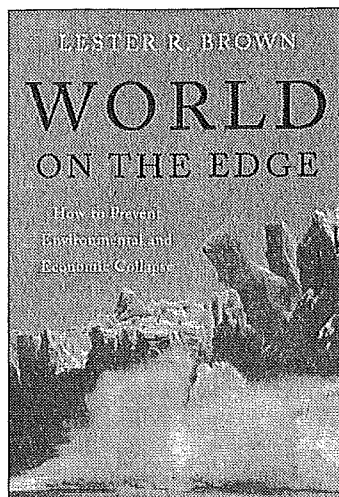
So asserts Lester R. Brown in his latest best-seller, "World on the Edge: How to Prevent Environmental and Economic Collapse."

Brown is president of the Earth Policy Institute, a nonprofit research organization based in Washington, D.C. Prior to assuming his present position, he served as president of the Worldwatch Institute, an organization he founded, for 26 years. During his tenure there, he helped to pioneer the concept of "environmentally sustainable development." Brown is also a MacArthur Fellow who has written several previous books on a variety of topics. I found it interesting that he started his career as a tomato farmer.

What distinguishes Brown from the throng of other writers tackling the same subject matter is the credibility he brings to the table. His deep understanding of both the core issues as well as the irrefutable consequences we will face if we continue on our present course is evident in the thorough and realistic way he describes problems and in the pragmatic nature of his proposed solutions. Although meticulous in his explanation of the origins and full extent of the environmental challenges we are currently up against, his focus never strays far from what can be done to overcome them. In the final analysis, he is much more of an optimist than an alarmist.

"World on the Edge" is comprised of 13 chapters in which Brown clarifies the factors contributing to our environmental crises, how they are affecting the planet and most importantly, what we need to be doing to contain and counteract these detrimental trends. "The signs that our civilization is in trouble are multiplying," Brown explains. "During most of the 6,000 years since civilization began we lived on the sustainable yield of the earth's natural systems. But in recent decades humanity has overshoot the level that those systems can sustain."

"No previous civilization has survived the ongoing destruction of its natural supports. Nor will ours," Brown continues. "Yet economists look at the future through a different lens ... they see the near 10-fold growth in the world economy since 1950 and the associated gains in living standards



*"World on the Edge: How to Prevent Environmental and Economic Collapse" by Lester R. Brown. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011, 240 pages, \$18.95.*

as the crowning achievement of our modern civilization."

Brown draws from a variety of disciplines as he weaves his powerful and poignant narrative. While the overarching theme of "World on the Edge" is unequivocally environmental, the author journeys through psychology, sociology, biology, geology, economics, and political science in his quest to educate and alert us to the dangers that lie ahead. The interdisciplinary approach Brown pursues in developing his ideas is one of the book's key strengths and helps to broaden its appeal across a wide spectrum of readers. Those with minimal academic preparation are as able to understand his basic arguments as those who are more intimately familiar with the underlying science.

The author infuses "World on the Edge" with examples and illustrations from around the world as he demonstrates how situations evolving in many different countries are similar and interconnected in ways not evident at first glance. After reading Brown's book, it would be difficult to make a convincing argument that we are not all in this together.

Among the many problems facing our ever-expanding global population is the growing scarcity of water as a key resource.

"Worldwide, roughly 70 percent of all water use is for irrigation, 20 percent goes to industry, and 10 percent goes to residential use,"

Brown notes. "The global water deficit is a product of the tripling of water demand over the last half-century coupled with the worldwide spread of powerful diesel and electrically-driven pumps. Only since the advent of these pumps have farmers had the pumping capacity to pull water out of aquifers faster than it is replaced by precipitation." He then proceeds to discuss ways we can manage our water resources that will help ensure their existence in the future.

Closely related to the availability of water is the challenge of feeding 8 billion people.

"Prior to 1950, growth of the food supply came almost entirely from expanding cropland area," Brown observes. "Gains in land productivity since 1950 have come primarily from three sources – the development of higher-yielding varieties, the growing use of fertilizer, and the spread of irrigation."

Brown sees decentralization as a key component of any effective future. And not unlike many of his contemporaries, he also considers education to be critical for more members of the global community to achieve a better quality of life.

"Children without any formal education start life with a severe handicap, one that almost ensures they will remain in abject poverty and that the gap between the poor and the rich will continue to widen," Brown writes. "So another key to eradicating poverty is to make sure that all children have at least a primary school education."

In the final analysis, Brown feels we need to be more realistic in our assessment of both the extent of our problems as well as what it will take to overcome them. "If the world is to move onto a sustainable path," Brown argues, "we need economists who will calculate indirect costs and work with political leaders to incorporate them into market prices by restructuring taxes.

"We can build a global community where the basic needs of all people are satisfied – a world that will allow us to think of ourselves as civilized," Brown concludes. "The choice will be made by our generation, but it will affect life on earth for all generations to come."

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