

Game Plan for Planetary Rescue

James Gustave Speth, *Red Sky at Morning: America and the Crisis of the Global Environment*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

Genevieve Fuji Johnson

In *Red Sky at Morning*, James Gustave Speth draws from his wealth of first-hand experience in both American domestic environmental policy and international environmental governance to deliver an assessment of the imminent global environmental crisis. What distinguishes Speth's book is that it does not stop at describing the pending crisis but goes on to articulate a strategy by which citizens, our societies, and our governments can act to abate the looming catastrophe. Thus, *Red Sky at Morning* is more than a book about the current state of the environment; it is a call to citizens across the globe to effect changes in our modes of thinking and patterns of behavior in order to bring about social justice and environmental sustainability.

As founder of the Natural Resources Defense Council and, later, the World Resources Institute, advisor to Presidents Carter and Clinton on environmental issues, and chief executive officer of the United Nations Development Program, Speth was directly involved in the domestic and international processes that gave rise to the plethora of environmental policies and treaties of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Although his vantage point is that of an elite policy insider, Speth is critical of both status quo practices and institutions that comprise the international environmental governance regime and prevailing consumerist attitudes that characterize populations in many advanced industrialized societies. Speth provides revealing insights into international failures to curb the rate and magnitude of pollution, climate change, and biological impoverishment. Moreover, and more importantly, he provides an action plan for citizens designed to divert our perilous trajectory. The result is an accessible, thoughtful, well-researched, well-documented book that illuminates the inherent limitations of the existing international environmental "GEOpolity" and heralds the imperative of a cultural shift in civil societies away from the ideal of affluence and toward the ideals of global justice and environmental well-being.

Throughout the book, Speth connects the exponential growth in the world economy to the unprecedented environmental degradation and destruction of the 20th and 21st centuries. Speth dispels the unfortunately common myth that the recent population surge largely transpiring in developing countries is the primary cause of the looming crisis. To be sure, he notes, population growth has been a huge driver of environmental decline. However, Speth directs his readers' attention to the gross economic inequalities that exist between developing and developed countries and the consequent need for citizens of the former to exploit their natural resources in order to eke out a basic subsistence. He also points squarely to the greed, excessive consumption, and unfettered economic pursuits of citizens of the latter as the most crucial causes of the environmental perils that confront us all. He argues forcefully that the primary causes of pollution, climate change, ozone depletion, land degradation, over-harvesting, freshwater shortages, and species loss lie in the failure of citizens and governments of rich countries to quell their thirst for material affluence and to redistribute equitably their wealth to poorer countries.

Speth explains concisely how and why most attempts at international environmental protection have failed. He identifies numerous limitations of current global environmental governance and the failures of the United States to provide leadership on this front. As he notes, the United States has failed to ratify the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Law of the Sea, and, of course, the Kyoto Protocol. Whereas U.S. domestic legislation has been successful in addressing some environmental abuses, its efforts to protect the global environment have been dismal.

The particular importance of this book derives from Speth's environmental pragmatism, which encompasses economic, political, ethical, and social dimensions. Speth does not dwell in the details of the environmental crisis and failures of international environmental governance. Instead, he turns expeditiously to outlining a series of measures—or transitions—that citizens, individually and collectively, can take to slow down environmental decline and attain environmental sustainability. These include: 1) A demographic transition to a stable world population, whereby women have broad access to non-coercive family planning services, health care, contraceptives, education, and employment; 2) a distributive transition to a world free of mass poverty, where no one is forced to engage in activities that continue to erode the natural environment and where all share in global prosperity; 3) a technological transition in which there is a rapid ecological modernization of industry and agriculture and the widespread creation and employment of environmentally benign technologies; 4) a market transition in which market forces serve environmental ends and prices reflect full environmental costs; 5) a transition in consumption from unsustainable to sustainable patterns, whereby consumers commit to sustainable diets, electrical generation, and transportation systems and to toxin-free homes and workplaces; 6) an epistemological transition, whereby all citizens become environmentally literate and a new generation of environmental professionals emerges; 7) a governance transition, where domestic policies and international regimes facilitate “compacts” between rich and poor countries that regulate the exchange of financial and political support for environmental improvement and protection; and, finally, 8) a cultural transition by which citizens free themselves from pernicious habits of practice and thought, including those inspired by desires for limitless material expansion and beliefs in the ultimate importance of economic growth.

Speth resists finding complacency in his list of transitions and instead seizes the opportunity to provide his readers with resources that they can use to educate themselves in their personal or community endeavors toward sustainability. In his chapter entitled “Resources for Citizens,” he provides an impressive compendium of books and websites organized with direct reference to his eight transition areas. The great value of this book is not so much in its scholarly qualities but rather in its straightforward articulation of the actions that citizens around the globe—especially those of affluent societies—must take for the immediate and long-term sake of both social justice and environmental well-being.