
World on the Edge: How to Prevent Environmental & Economic Collapse—by Lester R. Brown

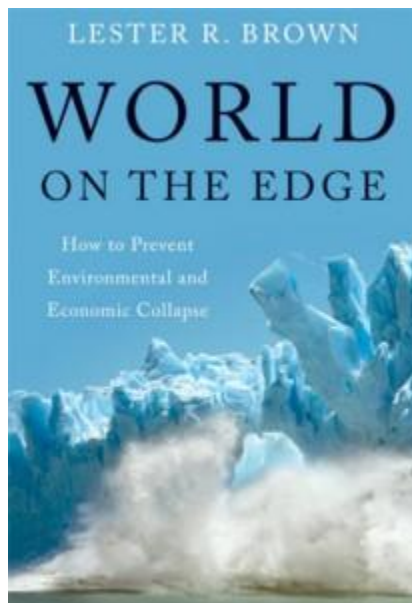
review by Paul Shippee

Refugee camps, migrating populations and failing states are becoming stressors in many areas of the world.

Is our world falling apart? Is anyone paying attention? You can learn the compelling on-the-ground facts by reading this new book by Lester Brown, founder of Earth Policy Institute (www.earth-policy.org). Who is Lester Brown? He is one of the pioneers and heroes of global environmentalism, according to the famous Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson. As president of Earth Policy Institute, a research organization based in Washington, DC, Brown has been honored worldwide with numerous prizes, including Japan's Blue Planet Prize, the United Nation's Environment Prize, as well as twenty-five honorary degrees.



You may not notice that we are facing issues of near-overwhelming complexity and unprecedented urgency by looking around the San Luis Valley, or anywhere in Colorado for that matter. When visiting local supermarkets you see more food on display daily than most people in the world see in a year. So you might never ask yourself whether we are in a period of environmental decline, and you might not ever think that this nasty earth fact can push our human world into massive suffering and economic collapse. This is a wakeup call. For much of the world's population, this time is already here—not off in some distant future.



Book cover of Lester R. Brown's "World on the Edge".

Lester Brown, in this new book, asks one main big question, "Can we change direction before we go over the edge?" As the foremost reporter of environmental and social data on the planet, Lester Brown has, for decades now, been tracking the facts of environmental decline with a special emphasis on relating this to social conditions in all countries the world over. He's been tracking factual conditions over a wide spectrum of areas such as world food supply and food security, resource depletion, human migrations, poverty levels, species extinction, population growth, meat consumption, women's reproductive health, fossil fuel decline (peak oil), pollution, climate data, peak water, deforestation, melting icebergs, ocean acidity, renewable energy, rising CO2 levels, etc. Brown concludes that the world is in trouble; he sees that Plan A, or business as usual, is not working, period. Based on all this massive and continuing research, he began to publish, a few years ago, a series of annual updates that he called "Plan B"—to be implemented at wartime speed to avert multiple catastrophes that feed on each other as each one tips the next one over into a path of no return.

Nearly three decades ago, in 1984, Brown began publishing the State of the World, annual reports on progress toward a Sustainable Society from the earlier research organization he founded called Worldwatch Institute. Brown's keen sense of monitoring environmental and social conditions over the years gave rise to an escalating urgency that can be seen in his annual book titles as they morphed from State of the World, into Plan B, and now in 2011 World on the Edge.

You will be astonished while learning his view of the details of the condition of planet Earth, the actual present condition of the majority of people who live here, and the sad trend that Plan A, business as usual, portends for the near future. Some liberal policy wonks project worsening conditions by 2030, close observers concede that 2020 is more accurate, while Brown says it could happen at any time due to interactive environmental dynamics and tipping points. As he ties together environmental decline with economic collapse, he sees a connection that politicians and the mainstream media shy away from due to its frightening and highly unpopular prospect.



Brown recommends that Plan B address four areas, starting yesterday:

- controlling/reducing climate chaos (and all associated with that, by 2020);
- curbing population growth (by education and providing school lunches);
- ending poverty;
- restoring earth’s damaged and declining resource base.

Traffic congestion is getting out of hand in many countries and contributes to major CO2 pollution.

It is the downward trend in these four areas of human activity, and their interlinked ecological relationship, that are creating the pressure for environmental and economic collapse that Brown is warning us about,



When Brown speaks of “wartime speed”, he is referring to the action taken by President Franklin D. Roosevelt when in early 1942 he banned the production of automobiles and within 90 days turned the auto industry into an efficient and passionate manufacturing operation making tanks, ships and planes to fight WWII.

One clear reason why this book is important is that, contrary to most environmental commentary, it is not Brown’s “opinion”, nor is it political; he lets the ecological facts he’s been tracking now for a few decades speak for themselves. This book is quite a sober look that should spawn awareness and discussion everywhere and in Crestone! We had been encouraged to “think globally and act locally” by radical economist Hazel Henderson, and it is difficult to know what we can do—besides talk in order to learn global awareness—except to learn more self-sufficiency by growing our own food and increasing our household and transportation efficiency. Voting and education via the Internet are also important actions that we can take in spite of the impulse to shut down and seal off our minds and hearts in the face of such challenging environmental and economic news. Perhaps this creeping shadow will all go away and some magic scientific angel will come along and save us the trouble. How many forms can denial take?



However, here in the San Luis Valley, where food crops and cattle-raising depend on the underlying aquifer, our community social network has an admirable history of being ecologically proactive. Thanks to people like Christine Canaly, founder of the San Luis Valley Ecosystem Council; Ceal Smith, tireless renewable energy policy advocate; Kim Smoyer, citizen organizer; and many others who rally in advance of catastrophe to protect our land, water, air space and noise pollution, our Valley culture has the integrity, concern and awareness that we can feel proud of and grateful for.

On the worldwide scale, it seems that food security and supply are the leading indicators for problems that lie ahead for the global population. Already China, unable to feed itself for the first time in ages, is buying up and leasing land in Africa, basically stealing it out from under family farmers via secret deals with local governments, to assure itself of an adequate supply of grains in the present and future. These are called “land grabs”. Other distressed, overpopulated and food-challenged countries are moving into South America to attempt the same as food riots spread among the world’s failing states.



Meanwhile, Brown’s sense is that the perfect storm or the ultimate recession will “likely be triggered by an unprecedented harvest shortfall, one caused by a combination of crop-withering heat waves and emerging water shortages as aquifers are depleted.” He notes that, “Such a grain shortfall could drive food prices off the top of the chart, leading exporting countries to restrict or ban exports [to countries in need]”. Food riots and desperate crop and/or cattle thefts have, according to Brown, already been reported in Thailand, Darfur, Pakistan, Egypt, Yemen, Morocco, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Mexico, the Philippines, Senegal and Haiti.

To underline the logic of these urgencies, Brown cites three sources of growing demand for food: “population growth; rising affluence and the associated jump in meat, milk, and egg consumption; and the use of grain to produce fuel for cars.” Farmers are losing cropland to nonfarm uses the world over as “cars compete with people not only for the grain supply but also for the cropland itself.”

A lot of environmental ground is covered in this book as Brown documents global trends such as “the ongoing liquidation of the earth’s natural assets, the growing number of hungry people, and the lengthening list of failing states.” He says that the most serious trends driving the world toward the edge are twofold: “destruction of the economy’s natural supports, and disruption of the climate system.” Naturally, something is not right and Plan A is not working.

Lester Brown lists among the consequences of our present global situation of falling water tables, eroding soils, expanding deserts, rising temperatures, melting ice, and food security, several unexpected problematic consequences such as the coming political surprises in response to food scarcity, the rising tide of environmental refugees, and the mounting stressors of failing states.

While watching the world clock, Brown wonders what we will need to do, and how fast, to build an energy-efficient global economy—harnessing wind, solar, and geothermal energy; restoring the economy’s natural support systems; and specific strategies to eradicate poverty, stabilize population, rescue failing states, and feed eight billion. These are big questions that are also emerging as very real. It seems there is a lot of suffering in store for a lot of people

around the world. Given that political will moves at the speed of glacial majesty, it is by no means certain that big answers to these big questions will be adequate or timely to the task.

Is the world falling apart? Is anybody paying attention? We can only hope that our president, our congressmen and senators, and the citizens will shift their priorities to saving our "world on the edge."