

Book Review



THE ECOLOGY OF COMMERCE

A Declaration of Sustainability
By Paul Hawken
HarperCollins, 1993,
250 pages

The fact that the title of this book, *The Ecology of Commerce*, reads like an oxymoron illustrates how wide the gap has become between the natural world and our commercial lives. Business believes that if it doesn't continue to grow and instead cuts back and retreats, it will destroy itself. Ecologists believe that if business continues its unabated expansion it will destroy the world around it. In this eloquent and visionary book, Paul Hawken describes a third way, a path that is inherently sustainable and restorative but which uses many of the historically effective organizational and market techniques of free enterprise.

Central to Hawken's argument are two basic facts: 1) the age of industrialism, as we know it, has come to an end; and 2) we are confronting a global ecological crisis that is considerably more acute than most of us realize. These facts both mean that businesspeople must dedicate themselves to transforming commerce to a restorative undertaking. They simply have no other choice as we are exceeding the carrying capacity of the planet — the maximum level of life an ecosystem can sustain.

Creating a restorative economy means rethinking the fundamental purpose of business, according to Hawken. It is not simply a means of making money or a system of making and selling things. "The promise of business," he writes, "is to increase the general well-being of humankind through service, a creative invention and ethical philosophy. Making money is, on its own terms, totally meaningless, an insufficient pursuit for the complex and decaying world we live it." We have the capacity to create a very different kind of economy, one that can restore ecosystems and protect the environment while bringing forth innovation, prosperity, meaningful work, and true security, Hawken says. "If this scenario sounds dreamy and Arcadian it is because we assume that economic forces only exploit and destroy." But this behavior is not "the inherent nature of business, nor the inevitable outcome of a free-market system. It is merely the result of the present commercial system's design and use."

Business has three basic issues to face, Hawken says: what it takes, what it makes, and what it wastes. That is, the harmful way it exploits natural resources; the excessive amounts of toxins and pollutants it produces and the excessive energy it consumes in the process; and the extraordinary wastes it leaves behind. We must develop a system of commerce that is patterned according to basic ecological principles. In nature, waste equals food, all growth is driven by solar energy, and the overall well-being of the system depends on diversity and thrives of difference. An ecological model of commerce would imply that all waste has value to other modes of production so that everything is either reclaimed, reused, or recycled. It would depend not on carbon but chiefly on hydrogen and the sun for its energy. And it would be highly varied and specific to time and place.

Because the restorative economy, as Hawken envisions it, inverts ingrained beliefs about how business functions, it may produce unusual changes in the economy. As

he shows with numerous examples and practical recommendations, the restorative economy will be one in which some businesses get smaller but hire more people, where money can be made by selling the absence of a product or service (for instance, where public utilities sell efficiency rather than additional power), and where profits increase when productivity is lowered.

The drive to develop a restorative economy must come from businesses themselves, Hawken insists, for "no other institution in the modern world is powerful enough to foster the necessary changes." The key is to inspire a willing, uncoerced, and even joyous redesign of the way we conduct business. What is needed are not new government bureaucracies or legislative mandates but incentives that will redefine the basis on which companies make decisions — from short-sighted commercial gain to long-view ecological and commercial sustainability.

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