

## THE EFFLUENT OF AFFLUENCE

### ..... Challenging the Cult of More-Is-Better

By Noah Sachs

Is economic growth good for the environment? Most economists answer with a resounding “yes,” often relying on an inverted-U-shaped diagram called a Kuznets curve.

The conventional story about the curve is this: at low levels of development, economic growth causes more pollution (more soot, more sulfur dioxide, more discharge of toxic waste), but at a certain tipping point, higher economic growth reduces pollution levels. A wealthier citizenry not only has more to spend on pollution control, but it also starts to demand better amenities, including breathable air and clean rivers.

The curve, in a nutshell, says that More is Better, not just for meeting consumer demand for Nikes and Nokias, but also for saving the planet.

Bill McKibben, a prolific environmental essayist and scholar in residence at Middlebury College, takes on this conventional, More-is-Better thinking in his ambitious new book *Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future*. McKibben’s central argument is that our commitment to more growth is not only environmentally unsustainable, but it also has impoverished community decisionmaking, local infrastructure, and the human spirit. Neoclassical economists, World Bank laptop jockeys, and Madison Avenue advertising executives are his *bête noires* as he tries to “crack the consensus that what we need is More.”

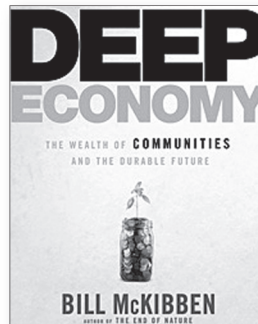
McKibben gained prominence in 1989 with the publication of *The*

*End of Nature*, the first mass-market book on climate change. He has since written nine more books, on subjects such as the joys of small families and retaining human-scale connections in a technological age.

He has emerged as a modern Thoreau — rooted in Vermont agrarianism, tooling around in his Honda Civic Hybrid, and ribbing the affluent for their wasteful lifestyles. “The good life of the high-end American suburb is precisely what’s doing us in,” he declares.

But McKibben has none of

**Deep Economy: The Wealth of Communities and the Durable Future**, by Bill McKibben. *Times Books, Henry Holt and Co., LLC.* 261 pages. \$25.00



Thoreau’s cantankerousness, and he writes with humor and grace. *Deep Economy* is a sorely needed antidote to the pursuit of economic growth as an end rather than a means. It is an optimistic book that shows how community-based living offers a transformational model for sustainable development.

McKibben shows no interest in sitting around Walden Pond. Instead, he criss-crosses the United States and several foreign countries to show us examples of new, “deep” economies — economies that are rooted in place and closely connected with the natural world. The book is full of engaging narratives about farmers markets

in Vermont, peasants cooperatives in India and Bangladesh, quirky low-wattage radio stations, and salmon catches managed by watershed councils. What links his stories is the theme of resilience. Localization may not have the efficiencies of globalization, he argues, but it is more durable and desirable in the long run, with its lower dependence on fossil fuels and its smaller ecological footprint.

McKibben argues persuasively that local economies also have the incalculable spill-over effect of restoring frayed social ties, what McKibben calls “the economics of neighborliness.” “Consumers have ten times as many conversations at farmers markets as they do at supermarkets,” he notes gleefully, reporting on a recent study. Whether it’s eating a tomato grown by a farmer you know or meeting your neighbors on a bus to work, living and traveling in community-based networks builds social capital and a sense of rootedness — in a word, trust.

Wal-Mart takes the predictable hits here, and given all the cooperative barn-raising, woodchipping, and organic farming profiled in the book, Vermont is apparently in the vanguard of the “durable future.”

The question, of course, is whether McKibben’s local solutions can be scaled up. Farmers markets and roof-top solar might work for Burlington and Montpelier, but they probably can’t feed and power Bangkok or Mumbai. Megacities and globalization are here to stay. We can’t dismiss *Deep Economy* as fringe utopianism, however. Thinking small can, at least, provide some viable, coexisting alternatives to the cult of More.

McKibben argues convincingly that the current scale of economic growth isn’t even close to ecologically sustainable. Here’s where the Kuznets curve comes in. The old industrial problems of soot and smog, plaguing

London, New York, and Los Angeles in the 1950s, were amenable to technological and legal fixes that were implemented as the United States and Europe grew richer. But a new generation of legal scholars and economists are busting the old thinking about the Kuznets curve. The curve simply doesn't fit new problems such as climate change, depleted aquifers, peak oil, and crashing fish stocks.

Now we're pressing up against the very limits of earth's life support systems, and there are far more of us (a projected global population of nearly 10 billion by 2050, quadruple that of 1950). McKibben vividly captures how our past economic growth has been drenched in oil, and now our addiction to fossil fuels is making the planet swelter with greenhouse gases. We can't just grow our way out of the new generation of environmental problems, according to McKibben, because they result not from economic activity gone wrong, but from "things operating more or less as they're supposed to, just at too high a level."

The numbers on China alone are staggering. McKibben reports that China's current per capita ownership of cars is about where the United States was in 1912. If China were to match current U.S. rates there would be 1.1 billion more vehicles on the road, spewing over 5 billion more tons of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere annually. For China to consume as much seafood per capita as Japan would require 100 million tons of fish annually, exceeding the total world catch. And if the Chinese ate as much meat as Americans, two-thirds of the world's grain harvest would be required to feed the livestock.

"That gives you some rough idea of what it would mean if most of the rest of the world even approached our level of consumption," McKibben writes. "We'd need extra planets. Several of them."

In focusing on consumption, *Deep Economy* re-energizes the debate over

what sustainable development means in rich countries, putting the effluents of affluence back on the policy agenda. McKibben asks the deep questions ignored by most mainstream economists. What is the pursuit of More for? Are we really better off with our three cars per family, our 60-inch TVs, and our quest for more disposable income to spend on junk from the SkyMall catalogue?

Public opinion research suggests that we're not. Levels of satisfaction and well-being, as reported in survey data, have declined throughout the developed world since World War II, even as material living standards have tripled. We're working harder, and spending more to let us work harder (on dry cleaners, pet-sitters, and take-out meals). Rates of depression and job stress are escalating. Surveys show that in rich and middle income countries (with per capita incomes above \$10,000), there is little correlation between a population's income and its self-reported levels of happiness.

The \$10,000 figure is "like the freezing point of water, one of those random numbers that just happens to define a crucial phenomenon on our planet." Below that figure lies the moral imperative of alleviating the crushing poverty of developing countries, a theme that provides the soul of the book. But above that figure, McKibben argues, we need a kind of *redevelopment* in the affluent West.

**H**e's on to something important here. If McMansions and high-end consumer goods don't improve life-satisfaction, yet they are endangering the planet, then it follows that sustainability will depend on scaling back material desires — on finding pleasure in the quality of relationships rather than in quantities of goods.

Missing from McKibben's analysis, though, is recognition of the corpo-

rate innovations we might be giving up in a shift to more localized, deep economies. McKibben is now flying around the lecture circuit (undoubtedly on airplanes built by Boeing) and he will likely compose his next book on Microsoft Word. He needs to address how we can get the benefits of Bigness without the glaring social and environmental costs, or indeed, whether a Boeing or Microsoft could even exist in the smaller-scale future he envisions. He never explains the role of Wall Street, venture capital, or other pillars of the financial system in the durable future.

The role of environmental law is also rarely mentioned in the book. We can infer that McKibben supports more spending on mass transit, changes in zoning codes, and ending agricultural subsidies. He's a leading advocate for deep cuts in U.S. greenhouse gas emissions (80 percent by 2050). But *Deep Economy* presents no specific legislative agenda. McKibben aims foremost to change personal behavior, and in the process he over-individualizes the problem of sustainability (Buy Less! Buy Local! Conserve!).

Despite these gaps, *Deep Economy* is one of the most significant environmental books of the year. It tests fundamental assumptions about work, consumption, desire, and the good life. It shows us a world of peak oil and ecological limits to growth, then gives us a glimpse of what that world could look like if we embrace it and plan for it rather than crash into it.

*Deep Economy* is simultaneously inspiring and sobering. McKibben is a thoughtful idealist with a clear-sighted message: "Perhaps it's the current scheme, with its requirement of endless growth in a finite world, that seems utopian and far-fetched."

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