

# Introduction: Drawing a Collective Map of Earth Island

*If you save the living environment, you will automatically save the physical environment. Omit the living and you lose them both. Our relationship to the rest of life can be put in a nutshell: The biosphere is richer in diversity than ever before conceived. Biodiversity is being eroded. If we continue this way, it is estimated that we will lose half the plants and animal species (on land) by end of century. That loss will inflict a heavy price in wealth and spirit.*

— E. O. WILSON

*We do not need magic to change the world, we carry all the power we need inside ourselves already: we have the power to imagine better.*

— J. K. ROWLING

*The sustainability revolution is nothing less than a rethinking and remaking of our role in the natural world.*

— DAVID W. ORR

WHEN DUTCH MARINER Jacob Roggeveen first landed on Easter Island in the South Pacific on Easter Sunday in 1722, he encountered a denuded, eroded landscape of about 64 square miles. Easter Island had a few thousand inhabitants and hundreds of tall stone statues known as *moai*, representing the islanders' high-ranking ancestors. Historians and archeologists have since pieced together Easter Island's decline from an advanced, complex society to one that destroyed its forests and marine life. They have concluded that its population was decimated by famines, slave raids, epidemics and civil war. Similar to the collapse of the Anasazi culture of North America, the Mayan culture of Central America and the Tiwanaku culture of South America, the Easter Island culture, in the words

of author Jared Diamond, committed “unintended ecological suicide — ecocide” by destroying its natural resources.<sup>1</sup> The collapse of Easter Island’s society has often been seen as a microcosm of what may lie in store for modern civilization if its social and ecological systems continue their precipitous decline. However, a brighter outcome for humanity could be on the horizon.

Over 8,000 miles from Easter Island in the North Sea lies another island: the windswept Danish island of Samsø, with about 40 square miles and 4,100 permanent residents. Unlike Easter Island, Samsø Island symbolizes a story of hope and action. In 1997 Samsø won a Danish government competition for its plan to shift from its reliance on fossil fuels to 100 percent renewable energy sources. The residents, known as Samsingers, launched a renewable energy program that has attracted the world’s attention. Over the last decade, Samsø’s wind turbines, solar panels, biomass projects and district heating systems, owned either individually or collectively by Samsingers, have made its communities fossil-fuel free and renewable energy exporters to mainland Denmark. In the process, the island has cut its carbon footprint by 140 percent. As community leader Soren Harmensen says, “We are not hippies. We just want to change how we use our energy without harming the planet or without giving up the good life.”<sup>2</sup>

The stories of Easter Island and Samsø Island highlight divergent destinies for the future of the world’s civilization — our Earth Island. One is marked by overconsumption, ecological decline and social chaos while the other is built on the inspiration and self-determination of individuals committed to making a difference in the world. Samsø, which historically was a meeting place for Vikings, comes from the word “samle,” meaning “to gather.” The Samsingers’ actions allow us to witness the remarkable possibilities that can emerge when a community gathers and unites with a common purpose and vision.

Every day on our Earth Island, with its 6.7 billion people, on average 5,000 children die from waterborne diseases (one every 15 seconds), over 70 species become extinct (one every 20 minutes), 85 million barrels of fossil-fuel-based oil are consumed and 23 million metric tons (about 28 pounds per person) of carbon dioxide are emitted by human activities into an already warming atmosphere.<sup>3</sup> Although the daily snapshot of Earth Island is indeed bleak, from isolated villages to major urban centers there are beacons of hope from thousands of large and small initiatives taking place.

This book draws a collective map of individuals, organizations and communities from around the world that are committed to building an alternative future that strives to restore environmental health, reinvent outmoded institutions and rejuvenate our environmental, social and economic systems. It is my intention to describe the emerging ideas and actions so that readers will gain a better understanding of the challenges we face and a determination to be part of the solutions. Each of us has an important role to play.

We begin to draw the contours of this map by exploring the value of Traditional Ecological Knowledge from indigenous societies including the Tibetans, Balinese, Inuit and Kogi. These cultures, which have survived for millennia, serve as a mirror to the world's peoples, reflecting practices that balance their well-being and that of the natural world. We then examine the flourishing of local efforts to become more self-reliant in energy, food, transportation and other areas. These efforts are being made by groups including Transition Initiatives in the UK and the US, Sustainability Street in Australia, Salmon Nation in the Northwestern US and ICLEI-Local Governments for Sustainability in conjunction with communities throughout the world.

Beyond initiatives at the local level, we turn to the greening of commerce. From start-up enterprises to well-established multinational companies, the transformation in commerce involves manufacturing goods and delivering services in ways that reduce environmental impact and emulate natural cycles. These alternative approaches strive to eliminate waste, to consider the full life cycle of manufactured goods—recycling products into new products at the end of their life—and to support individuals with socially-just employment opportunities. Along with the greening of commerce, we look at the transformation to green building practices. The shift to ecological design reduces the environmental impact of the built environment by reinventing regenerative design strategies, frameworks and tools that enhance natural systems and support the well-being of the people who live and work in our buildings.

We then chart the worldwide environmental conservation efforts aimed at restoring ecosystems in decline and protecting the Earth's biodiversity. These efforts range from protecting habitats at the continental scale, as in Australia's WildCountry Campaign, to identifying and protecting species, as in Conservation International's Biodiversity Hotspots program. In addition, we examine other mechanisms to protect habitats including land

trusts, conservation philanthropy and financial tools such as Payment for Environmental Services, involving wetland mitigation and species banking programs.

Our Earth Island is experiencing five interrelated global trends: ecosystem decline, energy transition, population growth, economic disparity and climate change. These enormous challenges are converging, with potentially devastating consequences. We face an unprecedented crisis — and a unique opportunity for a brighter future.

The weight of these global challenges is lightened somewhat by the positive changes reshaping our world. The greening of college campuses, the explosion of farmers' markets and organic foods, the innovative green building standards, the push for renewable energy sources and the new green-collar jobs all point to a new economy. Worldwide collaborative efforts are encouraged by initiatives such as the new prize-philanthropy programs and open-source mechanisms.

Creating leverage points magnifies the positive impact of these efforts, which can then be replicated throughout the world. The bedrock of successful initiatives is captured by the SPIRALS framework, a set of criteria for thriveable initiatives that are Scalable, Place-making, Intergenerational, Resilient, Accessible, Life-affirming and involve Self-care. These criteria provide a compass to orient us to our new map.

Our journey through this landscape of possibilities calls for a change of perception. We must shift from merely sustaining to *thriving*. The transformation from sustainability to *thriveability* challenges us to expand our imaginations and create the future we want for ourselves and for future generations. Thriveability focuses on collaboration and abundance. The concept acts as a catalyst to motivate us to take action. It encourages us to step away from the notion that we are separate from nature and instead see ourselves as an integral part of natural systems. Rather than seeking to limit our impact by being “less bad,” thriveability supports actions that regenerate natural systems and our quality of life. More significantly, thriveability embodies the innate qualities that define our humanity — our capacity for empathy, compassion, collaboration, playfulness, creativity, enthusiasm and love. These traits allow us to achieve remarkable feats in the face of adversity. In this spirit we can successfully confront our challenges and leave a positive legacy for future generations.

Instead of just sustaining ourselves through incremental improvements in our technological and social systems, thriveability calls for a vision

based on possibilities for change, which, like our dreams and imagination, are limitless. This new thriveable future is one in which we show respect for ourselves, for our neighbors and for the limits of nature. The essence of thriveability is a belief in the capacity of the human spirit to collaborate in creating new possibilities for lasting solutions. This thriveable attitude shifts away from scarcity, loss and volatility and toward abundance, prosperity and equanimity. We must celebrate being part of the natural world and acknowledge that, in geological time, we are newcomers with much to learn.

In this spirit of humility, curiosity and imagination, we have an opportunity to redefine our relationship with the natural world. We recognize that greening the world begins by healing and greening our own lives. I hope that the information in this book, coupled with the creativity, courage and determination profiled in its stories, inspires readers to make meaningful changes that improve the lives of all species on our Earth Island.