

Whole Earth Discipline: Why Dense Cities, Nuclear Power, Transgenic Crops, Restored Wildlands, and Geoengineering Are Necessary by Stewart Brand



Review by: Daniel Zoltani

"Whole Earth Discipline" by Stewart Brand is a "Green book", written from a distinctly unorthodox perspective. In order to save the planet and promote poverty alleviation, Brand argues as the title suggests, in favor of urbanization, nuclear power, and genetic engineering.

The fundamental point throughout the book was science must drive decision making. That the time for allowing ideology and emotion to stand in front of what science is telling us is over, and we are going to be forced as a society to make some difficult decisions relating to the future of our climate and the management of our ecosystems. Nuclear is not perfect but better than coal. If we want better land management, perhaps we need GE crops. If we want to preserve large wilderness preserves while reducing our global carbon footprint, we need to urbanize. If we want to control population numbers, we need economic development, which in turn is related to access and affordability of reliable energy and food consumption.

I picked up this book because I wanted to learn more about the issues surrounding these extremely debatable topics. Being fairly uninformed of the arguments either for or against issues such as Nuclear energy and transgenic crops concerning the environment, I was hoping for a brief synopsis of each. The book was fairly successful in presenting the scientific trends in support of urbanization, Nuclear Power and Transgenic crops, and when taking into consideration the importance economic development of the worlds poorest has on the environment, many of his arguments flowed congruently. Unfortunately, I didn't feel the book was very balanced and found it difficult to understand why such "logical" proposals have and would continue to meet resistance; which of course they do.

Perhaps because I could relate most due to my line of work in the developing world, I found the first section of the book regarding the value and necessity of urbanization to be the most interesting. In short, cities innovate faster as they grow bigger. They create enormous problems, but they also create solutions faster. Cities consolidate, and although hectic, their intrinsic centrality is more efficient. As urbanization has and will continue, I enjoyed Brand's review of the shanty towns and slums of the world and how they are part of an organic and positive process. This is not often the perception of slums but one I begin to visualize as he described scenes I have more than occasionally observed in slums throughout the world; having to tap into the grid,

a bustling and diverse local informal economy, the importance of a pre-paid SIM and the continuous creative (often by necessity) bottom of the pyramid innovators.

No matter one's position, I think the book is worth a gander. In a world that moves so fast and in so many different directions, innovation and scientific thought must be at the forefront of solving the current pressing issues at hand. Brand states at the close of his book, the last thing environmentalism should ever become is anti-science. And being pro-science means that you need to sometimes take a step back and give a good hard look at your assumptions and paradigms.