

Whole Earth discipline
Stewart Brand
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Agree with him 80%, support him 100%

Stewart Brand is advocating a point of view, a philosophy. In doing so he is wonderfully articulate. He says we should approach the major problems of our era in an undogmatic fashion, as skeptical scientists rather than as true believers in any quasireligious proposition.

Brand has had a very public career, and he publicly recants what he would consider to be past mistakes. Even in doing so, however, he allows for the fact that he could be wrong again. His quest for truth trumps any desire not to be wrong. He quotes John Maynard Keynes who, when confronted with the fact that he had changed his mind, asked his interlocutor what he did when the facts change.

He relishes in assailing traditional green shibboleths. He has enough respect for them to capitalize Green throughout. He makes a passionate case for premise that people are much better off in cities than in the countryside. It is easier on the people, and far easier on the planet. It also leads to fewer people. As people moved to cities, they do not reproduce themselves. Almost the entire developed world is below the replacement rate of 2.1 children per woman. Paul Ehrlich's "population bomb" was a total dud.

Nuclear energy is essential. Brand presents statistics that are simply not available elsewhere. Questions of efficiency aside, there is simply not enough real estate worldwide to support windfarms, solar energy plantations, or biofuel production on a scale approaching what is needed to replace coal. Nuclear is the only viable alternative. The greens are doing the planet vast disservice by standing in the way. The dangers of nuclear are vastly overblown, and opposition to nuclear is held with religious intensity, and without much scientific basis. I live close to Chernobyl. That accident cost about 60 deaths, perhaps one day's worth of mortality from the coal industry. Add in all of the lives that may have been shortened by radiation exposure and you may come up to 5000 – the United Nations' top end estimate. More than that die daily from lung problems brought on by our use of coal.

It is the same with genetic engineering. Curiously, we accept the benefits in the drug industry without question. Use microbes to grow insulin? Sure. Genetically engineered foods have been widely used in the new Hemisphere for a decade and a half with no problems at all. And yet, the old Hemisphere almost uniformly believes that they are poisonous. Brand points out, with humor and irony, that there has never been a more vast controlled experiment in the history of science. The results are absolutely conclusive, and still, the nonbelievers still want not to believe.

After all that, how does Brand retain his Green credentials? He is an unquestioning believer in the premise of global warming. He has a strong conviction that we have to do something. More than that, whatever we do will certainly take effect too late to offset some of the effects, perhaps most of the

effects of climate change. Pursuing this conviction, he hares off in the direction of another heresy, geo-engineering. He examines the schemes that have been proposed engineering our own climate. None of them come without dangers, but as he points out, the biggest danger of all may be doing nothing.

It is a highly readable, well informed book by a man who knows everybody in the Green movement. It should be required reading across the political spectrum.