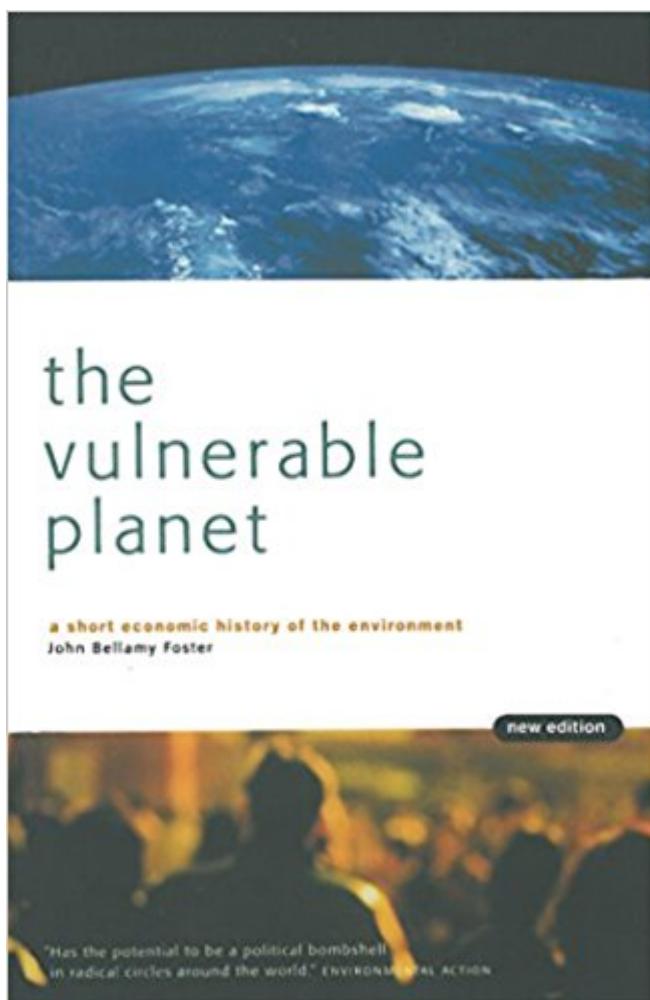


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# The Vulnerable Planet: A Short Economic History Of The Environment (Cornerstone Books)



## Synopsis

From reviews of the first edition (1994): "Extraordinarily well written . . . "--Contemporary Sociology "A readable chronicle aimed at a general audience . . . Graceful and accessible . . . "--Dollars and Sense "Has the potential to be a political bombshell in radical circles around the world."--Environmental Action The Vulnerable Planet has won respect as the best single-volume introduction to the global economic crisis. With impressive historical and economic detail, ranging from the Industrial Revolution to modern imperialism, The Vulnerable Planet explores the reasons why a global economic system geared toward private profit has spelled vulnerability for the earth's fragile natural environment. Rejecting both individualistic solutions and policies that tinker at the margins, John Bellamy Foster calls for a fundamental reorganization of production on a social basis so as to make possible a sustainable and ecological economy. This revised edition includes a new afterword by the author.

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## Customer Reviews

"With impressive historical and economic detail ranging from the industrial Revolution to modern imperialism, The Vulnerable Planet explores the reasons why a global economic system geared toward private profit has spelled vulnerability for the earth's fragile natural environment."--BOOK JACKET. "Rejecting both individualistic solutions and policies that tinker at the margins, John Bellamy Foster calls for a fundamental reorganization of production on a social basis so as to make

possible a sustainable and ecological economy."--BOOK JACKET. "This revised edition includes a new afterword by the author."--BOOK JACKET.

John Bellamy Foster is editor of *Monthly Review*. He is professor of sociology at the University of Oregon and author of *The Ecological Revolution*, *The Great Financial Crisis* (with Fred Magdoff), *Critique of Intelligent Design* (with Brett Clark and Richard York), *Ecology Against Capitalism*, Marx's Ecology, and *The Vulnerable Planet*.

John Bellamy Foster was a late arrival to environmentalism, having focused previously on what seemed to be more urgent issues of global justice. This book, from the early 90s, builds on the prescient ecological observations of Marx (Marx's Ecology: Materialism and Nature) as well as the more recent work of economists like Herman Daly (Steady-State Economics: Second Edition With New Essays). The bottom line is that global justice cannot be separated from environmentalism, a viewpoint that becomes more obvious as we bungle our way into the 21st century. Readers of this book, as well as those who already understand the economy/ecology connection, will want to read the more recent analysis by Foster—The Ecological Rift: Capitalism's War on the Earth. Another worthwhile book on this subject is—A Short History of Progress.

Fascinating! Wonder if Bernie Sanders has read it.

It's not the latest version (it was a 1994 edition), but it does work with the newer models. Great service as well; hope this serves as a purpose for some one

Great!

John Bellamy Foster's book "The Vulnerable Planet" admirably fulfills its purpose as an introduction to the current ecological crisis and its economic, historical and social background. Written in an accessible style, Foster gives an overview of the history of man's interaction with nature and the successes and failures in doing this, as well as an analysis of the current crisis and its severity. Unlike some introductions of this kind, the author takes care to discuss the ecological impact of our civilizations before the Industrial Revolution, and points out that even in ancient times, unsustainable forms and modes of production have collapsed even great civilizations and empires, such as the Sumerians in Mesopotamia, the Mayans in Central America and the Romans in North

Africa. However, Foster takes pains to show how the Industrial Revolution transformed our prior relations with nature, interaction as equals, into seemingly unlimited mastery over all natural resources. Combined with a worldwide mode of production that sustains itself by unlimited accumulation on one pole, and a compulsion of billions to labor for the same on the other pole, it is obvious that the planet can ill afford this system existing for much longer. Nations that have attempted to escape the domination of foreign capital and that have attempted to steer an independent course for their peoples have yet had to industrialize in the same manner to be able to maintain themselves politically, compelled by the same logic that they set out to resist. It is obvious therefore that to save our planet (and thereby ourselves), we must not only overthrow our current mode of production, but also do so in a manner that consciously resists the same logic of accumulation and resource destruction that has brought us into this crisis. The red and the green must always go hand in hand if humanity is to steer away from the abyss.

This is a little book, but very informative, although some may be put off by its Marxist point of view. Environmental destruction, as Foster shows, is as old as humankind. Nevertheless destruction of the natural world has increased at an astonishing rate during modern times making ours a very vulnerable planet. Foster links this increase to a specific social system, capitalism, instead of industrialism in general as many other critics do. This is a thought-provoking connection to make, since our media is usually silent on this topic. According to Foster (and Marx), it seems our system, capitalism, has an inborn need to turn everything it can into a saleable commodity in order to make money. Moreover it has to keep expanding commodities into ever new fields in order to return profits on money already invested. Like Topsy, then, the laws of its development tell it to either grow or die. Thus, when venture capitalists look at nature, they don't see what is living there; they see limitless raw material to be processed and sold, and if they don't do it, some competitor will. It is this relentless engine of development and destruction that has made the planet vulnerable. Thus Foster blames the problem on the way our economy operates, and not on technology in general. Critics should examine his arguments. A couple of other subjects Foster discusses are worthy of review, given how they are usually talked about. On the topic of population and poverty, Malthus, an 18th century clergyman, famously blames poverty on the poor. The poor keep having kids when they shouldn't, he argues, which is why there are more hungry mouths to feed than food to feed them. So, the lesson is don't feed them, they'll just have more kids. Being a parson and a kind of Newt Gingrich of his time, he would leave the wretched to the mercies of God. On the other hand, Foster (and Marx) take an historical perspective on overpopulation. Capital must have the poor, because

wage levels depend on having an excessive number of poor people around. Employers need them as so-called replacement workers, should their own employees strike for higher wages. Without that threat, wages would rise and employers would lose money. The poor are not God's creation, they are man's. (Considering how our chief central banker Alan Greenspan acts by encouraging unemployment, Foster's approach makes sense.) Ecology is another important part of our planet's mounting crisis. In making his case that our economic system is the main cause of the problem, Foster discusses Barry Commoner's four informal laws of capitalist ecology. They are worth mentioning. 1) Only the cash nexus (money) is lasting; 2) Waste can go anywhere as long as it's out of the capitalist loop; 3) The free market knows best: 4) nature is the possession of the private property owner. Together these provisions make up capital's marching orders in its assault on nature. Provision #3 seems particularly destructive since it replaces the complex web of millions of years of natural evolution with profit-driven human decision. Moreover, these provisions pretty much describe how big corporations act in the real world. Anyway, friends will find ammunition; foes will find points to ponder; and the appropriately curious will be rewarded. Foster's is a suppressed voice that really needs to be heard.

There's a lot of information out there about the destruction of the planet, but an understanding of where it comes from is harder to come by. Vulnerable Planet is a very useful starting point. Using historical materialism to trace the roots of environmental degradation, Foster breaks down some of the key debates, showing that it is not over-population, industrial production or humanity in of itself that is the problem. Rather the way that production and distribution are organized under capitalism that consistently puts the drive for profit above environmental sustainability. This book is short, but packed with information, statistics, and crucially a sound political framework from which to understand both the roots and the solution to the problem.

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