


CLIMATE

Data-driven hope for the planet

A data scientist offers an optimistic reality check for the Anthropocene

By **Erle C. Ellis**

In a time of daily environmental crisis headlines and growing eco-anxiety, how could anyone claim that a much better world is not only possible but that—in many ways—it already exists? The answer, according to data scientist Hannah Ritchie in her first book, *Not the End of the World*, is that this is exactly what the data tell us. As the science outreach lead of the widely cited project Our World in Data, she is certainly one to know (1).

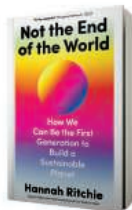
Not the End of the World is built on the same solid, data-driven foundations that characterize the crisp, concise visuals produced by Our World in Data, but it is a book with a purpose beyond presenting facts about our planet: Ritchie's goal is to convince young people to shake off climate doom and get motivated to address the unprecedented environmental challenges of our times. This mission is personal, and she wraps the narrative of the book around her journey from eco-anxiety to "urgent optimism."

Convinced that she "didn't have a future left to live for," Ritchie long believed—

falsely, as a surprising number of educated people do—that more people are starving, suffering, living in poverty, being exposed to natural hazards, and dying young than ever before. The turning point for her came in the form of the late Swedish physician Hans Rosling's masterful, data-rich presentations showing that the human world is almost universally changing for the better. Indeed, in many ways, Ritchie is building on Rosling's legacy, although she goes much further: Where Rosling focused almost entirely on the successes and challenges of human development, Ritchie takes on "the other side" of the sustainable future—the environmental damage that looms like a dark cloud over everything achieved in improving the human condition.

While the human world has generally been getting better in critical ways for decades, the opposite has largely been true for the rest of the planet. Yet, as Ritchie shows in data-rich chapters packed with illustrative charts, not all of the trends are going in the wrong direction, and we already have most, if not all, of the capabilities needed to address serious environmental challenges such as air pollution, climate change, deforestation, insufficient food supply, biodiversity loss, ocean plastics, and overfishing.

For each challenge, she describes how it was first identified and understood by



Not the End of the World: How We Can Be the First Generation to Build a Sustainable Planet
Hannah Ritchie
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352 pp.

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Excessive plastic food packaging is not ideal, argues Ritchie, but a little can help prevent food waste.

scientists and how it has been addressed to date. Most importantly, she highlights and prioritizes a suite of specific solutions, revealing how many seemingly intractable threats to people and planet are, in fact, actionable and resolvable through strategies available right now. However, she is careful to show that even with solutions in hand, many of the challenges we face are not being dealt with adequately and that, in many cases, the damage is accelerating.

Ritchie also debunks two strategies that, by her assessment, "won't fix our problems": depopulation and degrowth. She argues that the former is unnecessary—"peak child," she writes, has already happened—and more rapid shrinkage is unachievable without subjecting people to unconscionable harm and that the latter would leave most people on Earth unacceptably impoverished. True believers in such propositions will likely remain unswayed, facts or no facts.

This brings us to the book's greatest provocation—and subtitle—about how our generation can be the first to build a sustainable planet. Recognizing the successes and future potential of contemporary societies is certainly an important accomplishment of the book. Nevertheless, making such a strong and general claim about the superiority of today's societies over all that came before seems premature, problematic, and unnecessary and exposes the absence of a deeper and more nuanced theoretical understanding of human-nature relations in the book. Fortunately, this and other oversimplifications do not detract from the main aims of the work, which are overwhelmingly pragmatic.

That this book represents "a synthesis of nearly a decade of research and data" is clear from its remarkable coverage of environmental evidence. Yet its main contribution may be its ability to produce what Ritchie calls a "perspective that helped me dig myself out of a very dark place." There is real peril in our widespread failure to understand just how much human lives have been improved through societal efforts and in the level of doom and helplessness that seems to be spreading among young people. As Ritchie demonstrates in *Not the End of the World*, a better future for both people and planet is possible and even achievable. ■

REFERENCES AND NOTES

1. Our World in Data; <https://ourworldindata.org/>.

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