10 IDEAS CHANGING THE WORLD RIGHT NOW

The global economy is being remade before our eyes. Here's what's on the horizon:

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- REPURPOSING THE SUBURBS
- SURVIVAL-STORE SHOPPING
- BIOBANKS: SAVING YOUR PARTS
- NEED LAND? RENT A COUNTRY
- THE NEW CALVINISM
- ECOLOGICAL INTELLIGENCE
- AMORTALITY: FOREVER YOUNG
- AFRICA: OPEN FOR BUSINESS
- REINVENTING THE HIGHWAY
10 Ideas Changing the World Right Now

When the old answers don’t fit the new questions, that’s when ideas happen. They’re happening now. A guide to the future of the economy, the environment, medicine and more: 1 Jobs Are the New Assets 2 Recycling the Suburbs 3 The New Calvinism 4 Reinstating the Interstate 5 Amortality 6 Africa, Business Destination 7 The Rent-a-Country 8 Biobanks 9 Survival Stores 10 Ecological Intelligence
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Ecological Intelligence

BY BRYAN WALSH

When it comes to going green, intention can be easier than action. Case in point: you decide to buy a T-shirt made from 100% organic cotton, because everyone knows that organic is better for Earth. And in some ways it is; in conventional cotton-farming, pesticides strip the soil of life. But that green label doesn’t tell the whole story—like the fact that even organic cotton requires more than 2,640 gal. (10,000 L) of water to grow enough fiber for one T-shirt. Or the possibility that the T-shirt may have been dyed using harsh industrial chemicals, which can pollute local groundwater. If you knew all that, would you still consider the T-shirt green? Would you still buy it?

It’s a question that most of us are ill-equipped to answer, even as the debate over what is and isn’t green becomes all-important in a hot and crowded world. That’s because as the global economy has grown, our ability to make complex products with complex supply chains has outpaced our ability to comprehend the consequences—for ourselves and the planet. We evolved to respond to threats that were clear and present. That’s why, when we eat spoiled food, we get nauseated and when we see a bright light, we shut our eyes. But nothing in evolution has prepared us to understand the cumulative impact that imperceptible amounts of industrial chemicals may have on our children’s health or the slow-moving, long-term danger of climate change. Scanning the supermarket aisles, we lack the data to understand the full impact of what we choose—and probably couldn’t make sense of the information even if we had it.

But what if we could seamlessly calculate the full lifetime effect of our actions on the earth and on our bodies? Not just carbon footprints but social and biological footprints as well? What if we could think ecologically? That’s what psychologist Daniel Goleman describes in his forthcoming book, Ecological Intelligence. Using a young science called industrial ecology, businesses and green activists alike are beginning to compile the environmental and biological impact of our every decision—and delivering that information to consumers in a user-friendly way. That’s thinking ecologically—understanding the global environmental consequences of our local choices. “We can know the causes of what we’re doing, and we can know the impact of what we’re doing,” says Goleman, who wrote the 1995 bestseller Emotional Intelligence. “It’s going to have a radical impact on the way we do business.”

Over the past couple of decades, industrial ecologists have been using a method called life-cycle assessment (LCA) to break down that web of connection. The concept of the carbon footprint comes from LCA, but a deep analysis looks at far more. The manufacture and sale of a simple glass bottle requires input from dozens of suppliers; for high-tech items, it can include many times more.

The good news is that industrial ecologists can now crunch those data, and smart companies like Coca-Cola are using the information to clean up their corporate ecology. Working with the World Wildlife Fund, Coke analyzed its globe-spanning supply chain—the company uses 5% of the world’s total sugar crop—to see where it could minimize its impact; today Coke is on target to improve its water efficiency 20% by 2012.

Below the megacorporate level, start-ups like the website Good Guide are sifting through rivers of data for ordinary consumers, providing easy-to-understand ratings you can use to instantly gauge the full environmental and health impact of that T-shirt. Even better, they’ll get the information to you when you need it: Good Guide has an iPhone app that can deliver verdicts on tens of thousands of products. Good Guide and services like it “let us align our dollars with our values easily,” says Goleman.

But ecological intelligence is ultimately about more than what we buy. It’s also about our ability to accept that we live in an infinitely connected world with finite resources. Goleman highlights the Tibetan community of Sher, where for millennia, villagers have survived harsh conditions by carefully conserving every resource available to them. The Tibetans think ecologically because they have no other choice. Neither do we.

“We once had the luxury to ignore our impacts,” says Goleman. “Not anymore.”