

Book Review & Discussion Paper

**Paradise for Sale:
Regaining Sustainability**
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Reviewed by George Mendes

About Paradise for Sale: Regaining Sustainability

Brief Synopsis & Summary

Paradise for Sale: Regaining Sustainability¹ provides an alarming account of a small country in the South Pacific Ocean whose experiment with global capitalism has left its land ravaged and its society blighted by the very worst of western-consumption. An excessive level of phosphate mining has left the central area of the island as 90% wasteland² and its inhabitants with a number of intractable social and economic challenges. The parable of Nauru is one of power, exploitation, greed and the selling of the future for short-term gain.³

Nauru offers a chilling window into the future. In a microcosm, it appears to symbolise the fate of our planet – a global trajectory into disaster.

Historical Context

Indigenous Nauruans have lived in primitive self-sufficiency on their island for many thousands of years before the outside world brought the market economy to their shores. In 1888 Germany laid claim to the island and Albert Ellis, an employee of the Pacific Islands Company took a rock he had found on the island back to his office in Sydney and discovered it to be high-quality phosphate deposited by millions of years of accumulated bird-droppings.⁴ This discovery quickly led Ellis' company to change its name to the Pacific Phosphate Company and by 1909 the first 11,000 tonnes of mined phosphate were shipped to Australia.

After independence in 1968, the Nauruans themselves began to reap the benefits from the sale of their natural resources, and between 1970-1980 began an extensive mining project that changed their tropical idyll into an industrial quarry.⁵ The locals began living a lavish life of as millions of tonnes of the valuable resource⁶ were extracted and sold (at A\$60 a tonne),

¹ McDaniel C. & Gowdy J., *Paradise for Sale: Regaining Sustainability - A Parable of Nature*, 2000, University of California Press

² Central Intelligence Agency, *CIA Nauru*, retrieved on 15th February 2006, available at: <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/nr.html>

³ McDaniel C. & Gowdy J., *Paradise for Sale: Regaining Sustainability - A Parable of Nature*, 2000, University of California Press

⁴ Crossan, R. *Paradise Lost*, Telegraph Magazine, The Daily Telegraph, published 12th November 2005

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Phosphate is an essential ingredient as a fertiliser in accelerating plant growth and is used extensively in Australia and other low-phosphate-content soils.

allowing Nauruans to live well without having to work. In their new found wealth, Nauruans quickly imported luxury goods from mainland Australia such as SUV's, fridges, televisions and electric cookers, and many switched their diets from one of fish and fruits to canned beef, potato chips, beer⁷. Nauruans saw no need to pay taxes or even to send their children to school, as "they would forever be provided for, as long as they lived on Nauru".⁸ During this time, Nauru became the world's richest country with a GDP per capita above most developed western nations.

In the early 1990's the Nauruans found their cash payments decreasing gradually, until the payments stopped completely; Nauru had exhausted its deposits of Phosphate. Nauru's unsustainable development has left its citizens with no electricity, television or telecommunication network to the outside

Key Country Statistics

| | |
|-----------------|-----|
| Arable Land | 0% |
| Permanent Crops | 0% |
| Cattle | Few |

world. Instead, Nauruans must now relearn the basics of living – growing their own produce and cooking for themselves instead of eating out, or pulling frozen foods out of the freezer. These issues are presented against a backdrop of other social problems – Nauruans' poor diet has left them with chronic health issues, low life expectancy and one of the world's highest incidence rates of diabetes and obesity. Islanders comment that they wish "we'd never discovered that phosphate [...] I wish Nauru could be like it was before"⁹ and that as a community, "our cultural traditions have been basically wiped out".¹⁰

In a myopic attempt to solve Nauru's development challenge, the government is now also investigating claims that there is a second layer of phosphate under the surface of the island with an aim to restart digging – it seems Nauruans have learnt little from their past. This begs the question; if they cannot, can the rest of the world hope to learn from this tragic parable by drawing analogies to our own unsustainable industries?

⁷ McDaniel C. & Gowdy J., *Paradise for Sale: Regaining Sustainability - A Parable of Nature*, 2000, University of California Press

⁸ Crossan, R. *Paradise Lost*, Telegraph Magazine, The Daily Telegraph, published 12th November 2005

⁹ Reverend James Aingimea, Minister for the Nauru Congregational Church

¹⁰ Maggie Jacob, Nauruan schoolteacher

[†] McDaniel C. & Gowdy J., *Paradise for Sale: Regaining Sustainability - A Parable of Nature*, 2000, University of California Press

Source: Central Intelligence Agency, *CIA Nauru*, retrieved on 15th February 2006, available at: <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/nr.html>

Seduced by the promises of phenomenal monetary wealth, Nauru entered a market economy that has no long-term capacity to ensure human well-being or to foster enduring habitation. In a mere century the island home of this once self-sufficient culture has been transformed into a wasteland of mined-out ruins, whose 10,000 inhabitants are now absolutely dependent on the outside world for their very survival. *Paradise for Sale* critiques our current way of life, arguing that Nauru demonstrates the unsustainably ruinous course of our global market culture.

Analysis & Implications to Sustainable Development & Organisations

“Tomorrow will take care of itself”

– Old Nauruan saying[†]

What does this book contribute to the field?

The true value of this book lies in the simplicity of its sobering narrative. It effectively provides irrefutable evidence of the damages of unhindered development to adversaries of the sustainable development cause. Nauru is a demonstrable example of how our current economic mechanism is incompatible with the sustaining our biosphere. Nauru's isolation, both from other biome as well as economic communities provides a case-example of unsustainable development that has left an island ecosystem in complete ecological, economic and social ruin,¹¹ whilst it's marginalised residents live in abject poverty and dizzying disbelief of their change in fortune. The result is a unsettling glimpse into a potential future scenario for our world. Nauru's unsustainably accelerated development is a lesson for all – and to ignore learning from this tragic case is to invite disaster.¹²

Nauru's unsustainably accelerated development is a lesson for all – and to ignore any learning from this tragic case is to invite disaster.

Humans can continue to live on Nauru despite its loss of biological diversity as they can depend on other parts of the world to sustain them; something that as we develop on a global-scale we cannot do. The authors discuss how planning for the future does not seem to be a dominant human trait, but perhaps the greatest contribution to sustainable development is the book's critical observation that despite their evidently dire situation “[...] Nauruans seemed to be unconcerned about their bleak prospects”, and this raises a disturbing question: “if people in such an obviously desperate situation, caused by resource exploitation to the point of almost complete destruction of their natural environment were unconcerned, what hope is there to convince the rest of the world to be concerned about the more subtle but equally destructive activities going on around them?”¹³

¹¹ Part of the island is now used as a temporary holding ground prison for illegal immigrants by agreement with the Australian Government.

¹² Although locals, humbled by a return to poverty have begun an impressive recycling operation on the island out of necessity.

¹³ McDaniel C. & Gowdy J., *Paradise for Sale: Regaining Sustainability - A Parable of Nature*, 2000, University of California Press

Learning from this book

“[Indigenous people’s] very survival has depended upon their ecological awareness and adaptation. [...] It is a terrible irony that as formal development reaches more deeply into rain forest, deserts, and other isolated environments, it tends to destroy the only cultures that have proved able to thrive in these environments.”

– Brundtland Report, 1987¹⁴

How did you feel?

This book provides nothing less than a moving account of the lives of thousands of Nauruans who unlike other third world residents had an immense natural resource and subsequent financial wealth that was squandered leaving them in an unnecessarily hopeless situation. Readers are left with a disturbing underlying afterthought that is persistently presented throughout the book – Nauru is a

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window to our future. Even at best, Nauru presents a very real and possible example of what could happen to our planet. McDaniel and Gowdy discuss the biological impact of humans on Earth as well as the daunting fact that we are simply one of many species on the planet with no particular right to survive should we continue on our destructive path.

Finally, this book leaves readers with a sense of urgency and importance in understanding sustainable development from Nauru’s simple case-example perspective and the lessons that should be drawn such that any similarly devastating resource looting is prevented in future and extracted resources are re-used through a sustainable development method.¹⁵

¹⁴ Brundtland Commission, *Our Common Future*, 1987 Oxford University Press

¹⁵ Ironically, Nauru as a small and relatively flat island is a country that is projected to quite literally disappear should current changes in climate change continue unopposed. Nauru should be at the precipice of urgency for addressing sustainable development.

Conclusion

This review has offered an insight into the book *Paradise for Sale* – an island irreversibly altered by the injudicious progression of unsustainable development. The authors report, analyse and discuss the truths behind a country that has squandered the riches of its natural wealth by demonstrating in a neat and manageable microcosm, a simplified parable of what our current market economy is doing to the world.

Bibliography and Appendix

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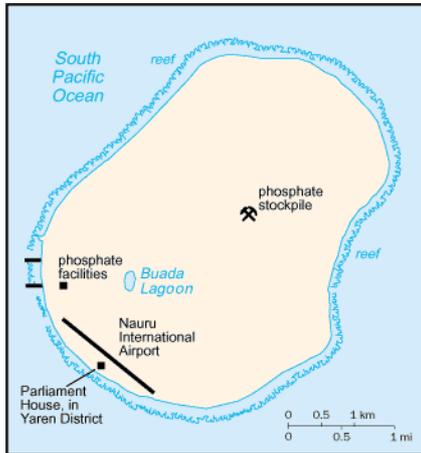
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Appendix

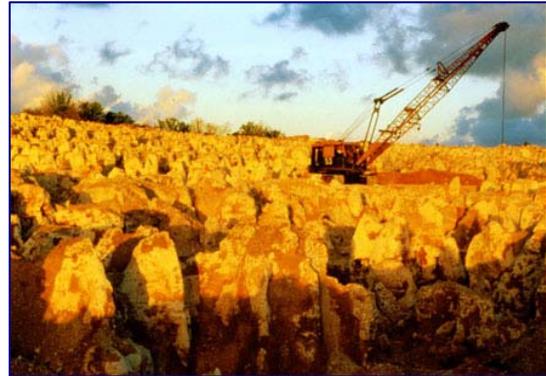
Nauru Island Map¹⁶



Island Photographs¹⁷



Tomano tree (*Callophyllum inophyllum*) ecosystem, the predominate ecosystem on Topside before mining.



Recently mined area on Topside with power grapple that is used to remove phosphate ore from between coral pinnacles.

¹⁶ Central Intelligence Agency, *CIA World Factbook Nauru*, retrieved on 15th February 2006, available at: <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/nr.html>

¹⁷ Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI), Nauru Pictures, retrieved on 22nd February 2006, available at: www.rpi.edu/~mcdanc/nauruPics.html