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The Infinite Resource: The Power Of Ideas On A Finite Planet



Synopsis

"Brilliant" - Ray Kurzweil"Required reading for all global thinkers and leaders." - Steven PinkerClimate change. Finite fossil fuels. Fresh water depletion. Rising commodity prices. Ocean acidification. Overpopulation. Deforestation. Feeding the world's billions.We're beset by an array of natural resource and environmental challenges. They pose a tremendous risk to human prosperity, to world peace, and to the planet itself.Yet, if we act, these problems are addressable. Throughout history we've overcome similar problems, but only when we've focused our energies on innovation. For the most valuable resource we have isn't oil, water, gold, or land - it's our stockpile of useful ideas, and our continually growing capacity to expand them. In this remarkable book, Ramez Naam charts a course to supercharge innovation - by changing the rules of our economy - that can lead the whole world to greater wealth and human well-being, even as we dodge looming resource crunches and environmental disasters and reduce our impact on the planet. From solar power to desalination, from next generation crops to next generation batteries, from technologies that could scrub carbon from our skies to those that could turn our garbage dumps into piles of valuable resources - solutions are possible: But only if we invest in innovation, and only if we put the right incentives in place around the globe. This book shows the scope of the problems, the landscape of the solutions, and policy changes we need to make to bring those solutions to fruition.

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Customer Reviews

*A full executive summary of this book is available at newbooksinbrief.com. The main argument: Ever since the industrial revolution the developed world (and increasingly the developing world) has enjoyed remarkable economic growth. This economic growth has yielded wealth to a degree previously unimaginable. Indeed, many of us today enjoy conveniences, comforts and opportunities of a kind that have traditionally been unattainable by even the world's wealthiest and most powerful people. However, we may question just how sustainable all of this economic growth (and the resulting wealth) really is. For the economic growth has been accompanied by environmental depletion and degradation of a kind as unprecedented as the growth itself. And while some of the environmental crises that have come up along the way have been solved by new technologies, others yet remain, and are as daunting as any we have seen. Climate change in particular stands out as one of the greatest challenges we now face. What's worse, many of the earth's resources that we have used to generate the economic growth are dwindling, and face extinction. Indeed, the very resource that has powered the industrial era (and that has also caused many of our deepest environmental woes), fossil fuels, has now nearly peaked. Looking to the past, we find that we would not be the first civilization to perish at the hands of a resource shortage brought on by overzealous extraction. Indeed, such an event has occurred on several occasions (including amongst the Mayan civilization, and that of the Easter Islanders).

I agree with Ramez Naam that "the choices societies make affect their rate of innovation." That helps to explain why, from the Fall of Rome early in the 5th century until the Renaissance, the Chinese, Japanese, and Ottoman people were far more advanced culturally and technologically advanced than were the Europeans. Since then, major developments that include Johannes Gutenberg's introduction of a moveable type printing press and Roger Bacon's refinement of Aristotelian empiricism to what we now view as the scientific method (based on observation, hypothesis, and experimentation), "Europe soared through the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution" while the nature, extent, and pace of change elsewhere "was far less impressive...The explosion of new ideas in Europe, and later in North America, led to the incredible prosperity of our current age." But there are problems of unprecedented severity that must be

solved. For example, as Naam explains in Chapter Four, a single "ecological footprint" can be used to measure human consumption of the earth's finite resources. "The world has about 1.8 hectares of useful living land per person on it. Yet the average citizen of the world uses up 2.7 hectares of that land via that lifestyle. (A hectare is around 2.5 acres, so that's around 6.7 acres.)...[At estimated] levels of per capita consumption, the planet can't support the 7 billion people it has on it, let alone the 9 to 10 billion it will have by mid-century. It can support only about two-thirds of the current population of the planet, or around 4.7 billion people. So what becomes of the 2.3 billion people the planet can't support today? The 4 to 5 billion surplus people we'll have by midcentury?" Ominously, high-income countries averaged 6.

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