

Sustainability through Storytelling

A Review of Treading Lightly by K-E Sveiby and Tex Skuthorpe

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by Brian Henshall

When is the Western World going to wake up to the fact that we are destroying our planet? This book may prove a “tipping point” for many people. The authors make an amazing re-construction of the workings of aboriginal society through the magic of storytelling in creating and preserving a mission that has lasted over 20,000 years. The mission – keep all-alive!

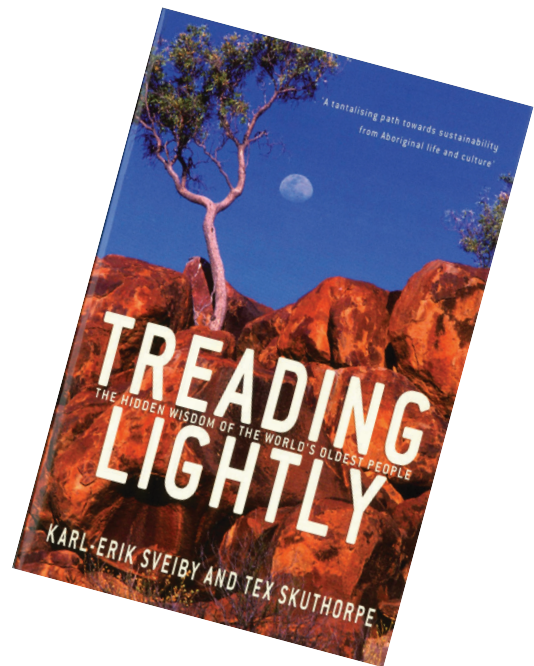
The skeptic may ponder if this is an exercise in applying management theory to a primitive people: Karl-Erik Sveiby is well known for his pioneering work in knowledge organisations, especially in the service sector where intangible knowledge is key. What convinces the reader is the intense collaboration with co-author Tex Skuthorpe, an aboriginal artist and trained knowledge scholar from the world of real life, raised on the stories of the aboriginal ways which ensured that they survived in tandem with their natural animals and their environment.

Ten detailed stories are explained, which illustrate the principles behind their nomadic society that lived in harmony with all others in the landscape. The stories have several layers of meaning, which students decipher after experiences in their lifetime. Indeed, this is life-long learning!

In 1788, “aliens” invaded this peaceful sustainable existence and the society was decimated by introduced disease and by the individual greed of the (largely) convict settlers. Within a few generations, almost all traces of sustainability had been overturned. Today cotton, the world’s thirstiest crop is exported from the world’s driest continent while the source of the water, the Darling River is nearly dead. This is ecological madness on a high-tech scale. Early explorers were mystified to find no sign of “chiefs” among the “indians”.

In fact, a multi-layered leadership pattern was there that was, perhaps, the most significant innovation developed by the Aboriginal culture: **a very advanced governance model for a sustainable world.**

As noted on p.146, “Thanks to their geographical separation, the Australian Aborigines were allowed



to fine tune their model over thousands of years and they would gladly have handed over their showcase on a plate to the rest of the world had they not been so devastatingly interrupted before the Western world was ready for it”.

There is much to admire in the presentation of this book. Copious research notes for each chapter are appended in 30 pages, and there is an excellent 10-page index. The presentations of the stories in the text are good, but the main impact is in the colored plates in the centre of the book. Clearly Tex and Karl-Erik formed a bond of mutual respect and trust that shines from the pages of their journeys to the sacred sites of the Aboriginal people.

This is one of the most thought-provoking books I have read in the last few years.

It will amaze you that “stone-age” people have so much to offer to help solve the problems facing us today. “Have respect for all things and so keep all alive in everything you do tomorrow”.

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