

Introduction

NATURAL ASSETS are the myriad forms of wealth that nature creates. They include the land on which we live and grow our food and fiber; the water we drink and use to irrigate crops; the air we breathe; the fish in the sea; the trees in the forest; and other plants and animals, wild and domesticated.

Human economic activities often deplete natural resources and overfill environmental ‘sinks’ with wastes from our production and consumption. Today these adverse effects are so widespread, and so severe, that some environmentalists see human beings as a blight on the face of the Earth.

Yet humans can increase the quantity of natural resources and improve the quality of the environment, too. People can and do *invest in natural assets*, both by repairing past damages and by participating constructively in the processes that constantly shape and reshape the living world. One example of such constructive engagement is the domestication of the crops – including grains, vegetables, and fruits – on which we depend for our daily food.

We humans are not apart from nature. We are a part of nature. How well we treat the natural world depends on how well we treat each other. Great inequalities of wealth and power enable elites to squander the Earth’s bounty while other people – of both present and future generations – bear the environmental costs. Human inequality is the enemy of environmental quality.

This booklet describes some of the dedicated efforts by communities around the world to advance the goals of environmental protection and social justice. In these pages, you will meet the new environmentalists – people who are organizing to reclaim nature by adding value to natural assets, capturing the benefits of good environmental stewardship, democratizing access to natural resources, and defending the environmental commons both locally and globally.

