

# Warp and weft of a world tapestry

We're all in this together or we won't be in it at all: Jules Pretty on a call to arms for the planet's future



**Indra's Net and the Midas Touch: Living Sustainably in a Connected World**

By **Leslie Paul Thiele**  
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Humans and nature: are we a part of the same whole, or have we assumed for too long a dangerous separation? This core question shapes Leslie Paul Thiele's fine book about the interconnected fabric of life. It is in some ways a state-of-the-planet report, of which there are many, but *Indra's Net and the Midas Touch* also does quite a lot more. It offers a way of thinking that might serve to chart a route into a safe and happy future.

Thiele begins with a story about personal change, recounting how the chief executive of a large corporation finds sustainability. At the dinner table, his son mentions a school lesson on global warming, and the father replies with a non-alarmist and corporate-style assessment. But his seven-year-old daughter pipes up: "Daddy, what are you doing to keep the world from getting too hot?"

The father stops short and finds himself replying: "Not enough sweetie, not enough."

And thus is suggested a radical new territory – that to solve the planet's problems, we have to think about ourselves, about how our minds work and about how we are indeed a part of nature. *Indra's Net* joins an emerging

literature that is breaking our many self-imposed boundaries on disciplines and norms. Environmental change will not come without inspiration, without a compelling narrative. It could come from both science and art, from data gathering and compelling leadership, from a greener economy and a different inner spirituality. Here, Thiele addresses ecology, ethics, technology, economics, politics, psychology, physics and metaphysics.

We moderns have a problem: the common and lazy reversion to false dichotomies. We separate people and nature, economy and environment, animals and people, domestic and wild, mind and behaviour, science and spirituality, good and bad. Yet solutions lie in combinations.

Rumi, the 13th-century Persian poet, said: "Out beyond the idea of right doing and wrong doing, there is a field. I will meet you there." For something different to emerge in our understanding of mind and nature, we must insist on new visions for what constitutes progress. These would have to make diversity a new virtue.

I was recently in southern Siberia with a group of famed Tyvan shamans. They sat in heavy braided coats with skulls and pellets and brass mirrors attached, talking about their connections to nature and how spirituality ties into the daily practice of living well. At one point, a mobile phone rang, and a man looked at it and nodded. It's Norway, he said, and stepped outside. The chief shaman observed, we are both an ancient and modern people; we can see how both work together.

This year, the *UK National Ecosystem Assessment* was published – a giant of an effort that took a couple of years to record, document and analyse how vital are ecosystem goods and services to our economy, culture and health. Yet despite such advances, we all too readily revert to a language that indicates

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that nature is "out there" and that what is "in here" is driven by other unrelated processes.

Notions of webs, nets and connections suggest something further. We have made the electronic leap to interconnectedness in the past couple of decades – from no email to a proliferation of social media, from landlines to handheld platforms able to access both information and people almost wherever you are in the world. That there has been such exponential growth in the desire for connection is illuminating and makes you wonder: is the next great step going to come from recognising the value of connecting to the natural part of the world in a similar way?

The metaphor of "Indra's net" derives from the Buddhist concept of interpenetration, of all the wholes being found in all the parts. Buddhists believe that we are already an intermeshed part of nature, not some separate entity.

But interconnectedness, as Thiele eloquently shows, is also driving us towards similar patterns of living that are destroying a finite planet. If only this were not so. Yet why should the poorest, who struggle for enough food, shelter and education for their children, not watch global media and wish for some of that security and affluence for themselves? But it is now quite clear: if every one of the almost 7 billion people in this world were to consume at the same levels as those in the industrialised countries, then the planet simply could not cope. Perhaps it already cannot.

Our human power to invent and create brings a new paradox. Even as we acknowledge (well, most of us do) that it is indeed humans who have caused climate change, biodiversity extinction, pollution and cultural loss, so we have reinforced an image of us as the most potent force on the planet. We thus come to believe another myth – that we can invent ourselves out of any problem. We may not have that power. It may be too late.

So much that seemed good is not: biofuels seemed a fine solution, until the US ended up burning one-third of all its food maize. Midas touched some biofuels, but they turned to tarnished gold. Now we have taken on a new faith, although

we do not call it thus: faith in progress is the new religion.

A question: is the current global recession just a dip? All politicians hope we will grow ourselves, eventually, out of the structural problems. But for this single and fragile planet, business-as-usual growth of this sort is bad. It destroys us anyway. Perhaps we are seeing the end of one way of living. Here, Thiele is suggesting that there are other ways.

I once climbed the Temple of the Giant Jaguar at Tikal in

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Guatemala. It towers over a spectacular rainforest, spider monkeys crashing in the branches far below, and 1,000 or so years ago it was the centre of the fifth-largest city in the world. You cannot fail to be utterly humbled by it. I watched a storm tear across the forest and lash us as we held tight, exposed, on the Mayan stones. Tikal's architects, planners, builders and leaders never foresaw this future: a city lost in the jungle, a great civilisation all gone. They thought, like us today, that they would go on forever.

Nonetheless, Thiele sets out to create an expression of hope. Most of us remember Midas from Ovid's account for his greed and joy at being able to

turn everything to gold. But the more important part of the story occurs after Dionysus agreed to rescind his wish. The king thrived, content to be relatively poor of material goods, but well-fed, happy with his family and much the wiser.

In the final chapter, Thiele concludes that living in a connected world demands the best of us. He draws on pre-eminent contemporary and ancient writers and thinkers to make a simple point: we cannot conceive of changing the world (for better, we hope) without considering changing ourselves. He draws on observations from T. S. Eliot, Sophocles, E. F. Schumacher, Lao Tzu, Aldo Leopold, Buzz Holling, Wes Jackson and Paul Hawken. All have said many wise things about how to engage in a journey that might end in something other than destruction.

As the US farmer-poet Wendell Berry says: "Great problems call for many small solutions." A good start would be to read this book.

Jules Pretty is professor of environment and society, University of Essex. He is author of books including *The Living Land: Agriculture, Food and Community Regeneration in Rural Europe* (1998), *The Pesticide Detox: Towards a More Sustainable Agriculture* (2005), *The Earth Only Endures: On Reconnecting with Nature and Our Place In It* (2007) and *This Luminous Coast* (2011). His blog, Nature Notes, is at [www.julespretty.com](http://www.julespretty.com).

THE AUTHOR



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**Chloe Darracott-Cankovic**