Preface

There are defining moments in our lives when our understanding of ‘the way things are’ changes forever. I grew up in a small English village, and in many ways it was an idyllic place to live. Our house was a short walk from the school, the school a short walk from the church, and the church a short walk from the playing fields. A large amount of my time was spent walking between these places. I scarcely paid any attention to the increasing levels of traffic pouring over the tiny medieval bridge, on this, the only route to London.

But I vividly remember coming home one day in 1974 to find that all the trees along the lane had been cut down. Huge machines, now working far off in the distance, had cut a swathe through the woodlands as far as I could see. I ran to my friend’s house, and we slipped through his back fence to gaze on the destruction with a combination of awe and outrage. Where were we going to play? The big copper beech that stood at the end of the garden had been saved, but it was perched somewhat precariously on the edge of a deep cutting that marked the passing of the bulldozers. Even when it was explained to me that those forests had been cleared to make way for a new motorway that would make our village safer, I did not really understand. The experience left me shocked by the way in which humans could destroy the world around them. Surely there had to be a better way?

After graduating from college several years later I migrated to Tasmania, determined to make a new life in a place that was still wild and free, unlike old Europe. On arrival, I found out that where I was to live had been scheduled for logging. And so began a twenty-year campaign involving many people from Australia and around the world to protect Kooparoona Niara (the Great Western Tiers) – and to develop other sources of income for the local community in addition to forestry. The ‘Tiers’ are now World Heritage, and the basis for a thriving tourism industry. Yet they remain under threat, as the federal and state governments argue over whether they should be logged, or not.

I have since moved to the ‘mainland’ with a PhD from the University of Tasmania, to find work as a newly minted academic. Bellingen seemed like a welcoming and progressive-thinking community that inspired me
with its commitment to sustainability. But as I write, the forests at the top of my street are being cut down. Chainsaws are screaming, machinery is grinding its way up and down the steep slopes, and log trucks are driving past my house. New subdivisions are being planned in what is left of the forest below. A track has been cut through the bush that crosses several creek lines, and mud and silt from the land clearing is making its way onto neighbouring properties. At the same time, a new motorway is carving its way through the wetlands of Shortcut Road, gravel trucks are pouring through the centre of our town, and our shire council and citizens seem completely powerless to do anything. Is there no escape from what humanity is doing to our environment?

I believe and hope there is. For me, the 1992 Rio de Janeiro ‘Earth Summit’ provided an answer to that question. It was a rare moment, when countries from around the world came together to find a common solution to our collective impact on the planet. I support both the idea, and practice, of sustainable development. Working as I do in developing countries and polluted cities, the necessity of improving people’s daily lives is obvious. But I am acutely aware that this cannot be at the expense of the environment. Sustainable development offers humanity and the many other species that inhabit this globe an alternative to the profit-maximising, planet-destroying model of late twentieth-century capitalism. It provides an opportunity to produce and consume goods and services in a new way that takes the environment and society, as well as the economy, into consideration. Capitalism has evolved.

But ‘SusDev’ is not without its contradictions and there is no easy way forward. This book looks at some of the most celebrated – and at times problematic – efforts to harness market forces for good. My colleagues and I acknowledge and give thanks to the many practitioners, advocates and experts who gave so freely of their time in the course of our research. They have helped shine a light on this exciting and challenging endeavour to make the world a better place for future generations. Any mistakes are entirely our own.

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