

About the author

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Inventing for the Sustainable Planet

A blog novel
By Stephen Hinton

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Preface

Max Wahlter is my alter ego and blogger. This book is a rearranged collection of blog entries. The place Max visits is, of course, by its nature fictional. However, all the Internet sites mentioned, the Imagestreaming methods and the facts gleaned during the verifications are 100% accurate to my knowledge.

I would like to thank Dr Win Wenger for his invention of Imagestreaming and for so generously making all instructions and assistance available via his site www.winwenger.com.

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Journey Preparation

27th September

Max here. Journalist covering technological development. Hard up, overworked and not really enjoying my job.

So I've decided to do it. I heard about it at a management conference on creativity. All you do is formulate a problem, turn on the tape recorder, and start describing what you see. You 'visit' a place that has solved that particular problem. I tried it at the conference and it seems to work really well. The method turns everyone into Leonardo da Vinci. I'm going to find out about sustainable technology, I've always wanted to be an inventor and sustainable technology is useful and urgent. I might even be able to make some money at it.

And I'm going to post the transcripts here. I've already done a few.

29th September

Before I do this I will go over the techniques in case any of you want to try this out. It's very simple: you work out what you want to know, and ask politely to travel to a land with this knowledge. You put the tape recorder on, close your eyes and describe aloud everything you see. And keep describing, keep the flow coming.

For me - let me describe the problem as I see it. We citizens of Earth have not achieved a sustainable way of life. Us 'haves' exert a large 'footprint', requiring a lot of natural resources for our way of life. And the consumption of these natural resources leads to pollution. For the 'have nots' whilst their footprint is smaller, they are moving toward a 'have' way of life; living in cities, increasing resource usage. And the outlook is bleak. The Earth just cannot support everyone living the way the so-called developed world does.

So my quest: a land where people live in a sustainable way, with the standard of living, akin to say, of Europe. Show me the technology that I may learn, document and pass on to others.

That's all for now I'm going to set the tape recorder up. I feel quite excited.

30th September

Hey I did it. I put the tape recorder on, closed my eyes and I there I was in some kind of lobby. And then I arrived. I've finished editing this first part of the tapescript. Check it out...

Journey one: Getting there

Tapescript part one

I see myself in some kind of waiting area, and I'm sitting on a wooden bench. I realise I need to take that lift. I hasten over to it, there on the right. Inside it seems old, no feeling of modernity about it at all. Yet that seems deliberate somehow. There aren't many straight lines here. Instead it is bulbous, in cream-coloured enamel. On the left there is a large steel wheel about half a metre in diameter, like something you might find on a sailing yacht. Oh, the door is already closed.

There is a green button with GO on it. I press it. The lift rushes upwards and I feel both the G forces and the excitement of exploration of a new country.

The lift doors open automatically and I step out into something that at first glance reminds me of an airport. A shiny, clean marble floor leads into a large corridor on the right and another curves away to the left.

In front of me are stairs leading down to what looks to be an exit. Just on the right of the hall there is a kiosk, and directly in front of me a flower bed of what look to be artichokes, which are covered by a thin brown sheet.

I bend down to examine them. I know nothing about artichokes - are they artichokes?

I look up at the lady serving in the kiosk.

'We take every opportunity to grow food wherever we can', she says. 'There is a library you know.'

I sense she knows my mission here.

I thank her and go off down the corridor on the right. It does look like an airport. I see shiny tails of what looks like aircraft in the distance. And I feel I'm on the edge of a discovery. I walk past a cafe serving chips and leaves of salad. Past a notice saying something about insects control and stuff like that. I can just see the tail of the aircraft. Big and chunky. I smell rape seed oil. Vegetable based fuel burnt in giant jet engines. Is it really possible? Anyway...

I don't like airports - how did I get here? I would like to look around locally and see how they live.

I retrace my steps and turn past the kiosk and down the steps. At the bottom I see I have to put on Wellington boots. I see a sign reminding me of cleanliness, and a rucksack to keep my indoor shoes in. As I start to open the door I notice the special airlock and that it is hermetically sealed.

So I open the hydraulic to get out, and notice the foot scraper which sucks the soles of my boots and I'm outside.

The first thing I notice is no asphalt. Only gravel to walk on. The explanation hits me, natural flow of water through the ground, gravel paths allow that. Asphalt is banned here! It seems everyone here walks around in Wellingtons; it's the done thing, and natural permeation of water through the soil is a major aim.

It's a nice place, like a park. I continue along the gravel path, there's lots of water here - lakes and ponds - it's all nicely done with flowers, plants.

I turn left to look at what seems to be a large round cylindrical building partly hidden by bushes. Reading the sign on the back I see it's a biogas generator. Am I in the middle of a sewage works? I am! The whole area is a sewage plant! One of the by-products is these brown covers I saw outside the lift. I don't know how they work but I guess they fertilise the soil. And keep weeds off and moisture in. That's what I call recycling.

And ingenious, a multi-function use for everything. Recreation, biogas, sewage treatment, fertiliser production. Cool. I'm on to something here.

Sustainable technology encountered

- Separation of internal environments in buildings from the outside ... I have no idea why they do this. Why do they want this area so clean? At the same time it is an area where water is treated, so maybe it is a requirement if an area is used for both recreation and water treatment.
- Rape seed oil based jet fuel ... I'm no chemist so I won't pursue that, but it sounds plausible.
- Biogas production from sewage treatment ... already being done, so I won't pursue that.
- The covers used for growing ... that sort of covering is already available but it is not bio-degradable as far as I know... on list for further investigation.

Tapescript part two

I seem to be approaching a greenhouse. I take a look inside - they're growing tomatoes. A man is in the greenhouse, he appears to be working here. That's clever - there's even another activity in the area. Where you grow is where you walk is where you treat water and recycle sewage. And, they are taking every opportunity to grow food. That's a nice expression and a nice principle.

I am eager to explore this method..

I could try to ask the man a few questions.

'Excuse me what's going on here?'

'It's just a greenhouse.'

'Do you work here?'
'Yes I do.'
'How do you distribute the food?'
'People come and pick it when they want to.'
'What about payment?' I ask, used to everything costing - I feel I've said something really stupid and that he knows something I have no idea about because he just laughs and smiles. Interesting. There seem to be many secrets here.
'What about the covers I saw outside the lift?'
'We don't use them on tomatoes.'
'How do you get around the city?'
'We walk, that's the way to do it.'
I wander off from the greenhouse with the feeling that somewhere close by is a cafe. I'm troubled by the lack of electronics here. I mean, if they have big planes they must have technology.
I recognise that tree, it's a Hazel tree. Hazel nut trees! So it's not just a park, it's a park, water treatment plant, a place to grow food and aesthetically pleasing and no bicycles, people just walk here. It is the simplicity that surprises me.
And here's the cafe and a sundial. And a big pillar where people post messages - and they do like to post messages, it seems to be part of the culture here. There's one for me - I read it.
It's OK - enjoy yourself - it's fun.
Someone knows my hang-ups and what I need to hear, yes on this visit I need to relax and enjoy myself. I am stressed because my job has no future, I'm trying to find an alternative living, and even doing this creativity exercise I'm unrelaxed. I'm too good at being uptight, I know.
So, I'm starting to get into the local culture. And it's a wandering around in Wellington boots type of culture. Asphalting is forbidden. The whole area forms part of natural water cycle.
That's why bikes aren't allowed. A special kind of cleanliness is mandatory in this area. It's completely clean and unpolluted. Gravel is the key to natural water treatment and there's also the efficient use of land. Wait a minute how do they run the cafe with machines where not a drop of oil is allowed? I see the answer ...only vegetable based oils and natural rubbers.
I must say it's been a pleasant place to visit. I could get into this kind of calmness.
It's funny, but although I haven't seen anything to spark off these thoughts, I sense two things. One, this culture has a focus on seeds and growing things. Two, they view the animal side of the human being in a special way. They call it 'the organism'.
Don't ask me how I came up with this!
I go back to the door. I put my shoes on, stand on the grill and again they get the sucking treatment. This is to remove environmental poisons. I go up the steps and cast a thought to the kiosk - what do they sell there? I get the feeling they are encouraging people to grow food. There's a sign saying 'Today: Tomatoes'. They are selling some kind of tray thing that they are grown in.
The lady seems to know a lot about my project and says:
'Draw your conclusions and raise your questions before coming back.'
'Yes I will do that', I reply.
Feeling tired, and feeling I can't take in anymore. I thank for my visit, get into the bulbous enamelled lift, push 'GO' and down I come. I come out into a busy thoroughfare. Let's call it a day.

Verification notes: Rape-seed oil fuel

I did one of those tests on your personal eco-profile. I was doing great, not using the car to travel to work, living in a relatively small flat etc. Then, they asked me how much I travelled by plane. My profile shot up way above average.

So it is true, that in terms of carbon dioxide emissions, for your personal eco- impact you should reduce air travel. Or use fuel from renewable sources.

Then late last week a motoring journal on TV showed a group of people who took used cooking oil, put in an additive, and off they went in a diesel Volvo.

So organic fuel sounds feasible. But it still does not solve the problem of reducing carbon dioxide emissions.

Verification notes: walking everywhere

Not a bad idea that. If we walked to work instead of sitting in cars or on public transport we'd be a whole lot healthier. And walking is a good fat burner. I saw a calculation that you could burn ten kilos in one year by walking three half hours a week.

People in medieval times would walk long distances every day to fields or local markets.

But how do you plan towns and cities around walking?

Method notes

The method seems to work. I find it interesting that I 'see' things as well as pick up impressions. The method also acts as a teacher.... Like it told me to relax and have fun and enjoy my visits as well as telling me to frame my questions, which reminds me I must do that for my next visit.

Reflections Journey one

My intuition tells me I have seen this 'sustainable place' from one angle and there are many more angles. Maybe there are other ways to get to this land and reveal other aspects.

Questions for next time: how do they handle 'we walk everywhere?'