

# too clever by half

Technology is at once a hugely constructive and a hugely destructive force, and for the most part we have been content to ignore the latter while enjoying the benefits of the former. But, suggests **Ian Michler**, it's high time that we begin to think seriously – and innovatively – about tempering its damaging effects.



IAN MICHLER

## IN THE COURSE OF MY RESEARCH

For last month's diary, 'The end of the line?', one factor cropped up again and again: the role technology has played in our destruction of the oceans. In essence, global fishing fleets are using such advanced equipment that without the most stringent of controls, they will completely empty every marine ecosystem on earth.

And it's not only the oceans. The same applies to almost every facet of humankind's development over the past century or more. As much as any other contributing factor, technology is responsible for the predicament our planet finds itself in. But say that out loud and most people will balk at the idea. To admit the truth of it would mean having to change the way we think, behave and, ultimately, live. This is a very uncomfortable message for most of the middle and upper economic classes around the world.

Let's look at some of the high-tech developments that we take for granted, like the combustion engine, super-tankers, plastic products, splitting the atom, deep mining techniques, drug manufacture and space travel. When they arrived on the scene they were all major advances, technologies that would make our lives easier and more successful. And, if we ignore everything but the direct impact they have had on individual lives, mostly they have done that. As time has passed, though, we now also know that when viewed collectively as the primary components of our means of production and consumption – in other words, our global footprint – their impact on the planet has been hugely significant and ultimately negative.

Driven by the notion that a constantly increasing rate of economic growth is the overriding marker of a successful society,

developing or purchasing more advanced technologies has become fundamental to fulfilling this aim. And with the array of new tools at our disposal, we have been able to reach further, deeper and higher into every imaginable ecosystem and exploit more effectively every possible resource.

History indicates that most engineers or scientists side with the vested interests of the day,

Electricity has become indispensable to most of the world's humans, but producing it takes a heavy toll on the planet.

and it is also apparent that each generation of innovators has failed to consider the contra-indications or long-term consequences of their technologies. Spare a thought for the generation 50 years hence and what it may have to deal with because of today's scientists who are forging ahead with genetic engineering.

After well over a century of this developmental model, it is now difficult to argue that the world's natural systems – so vital for our survival – are not faltering. In many instances, the impacts of technology have got out of control and it is now obvious that to continue on the same path would be very short-sighted. If technology is going to work for us, we need to change the way we develop it – and certainly the way we apply it. Fortunately there is good news on this front. Many innovators are working on alternative technologies that embrace natural processes, 'Cradle to Cradle' (or regenerative) design concepts, reduced resource utilisation and non-toxic products (see the panel for examples).

There is, of course, another possibility to consider: maybe our current behaviour is part of our genetic disposition, and the way *Homo sapiens* is following its evolutionary path cannot be controlled or modified, no matter how clever we think we are.



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