



The End of Evolution

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In the tradition of E.O. Wilson's eloquent *The Diversity of Life*, the author of the award-winning *On Methuselah's Trail: Living Fossils and the Great Extinctions* recreates the dramatic history of life and its great extinctions and issues a compelling call to act to preserve our world's biodiversity. Photos; illustrations.

The End of Evolution Details

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From Reader Review The End of Evolution for online ebook

Staci C says

I liked this book and I thought that it's premise was really interesting, but I just had a hard time getting in to it. At first I really liked the way the author would imagine himself in prehistoric times, but after a while it got kind of old and I just wished he would get back to giving me the info I was looking for. I did really enjoy the writing style, but I thought it was a little slow in getting to the point.

Yael says

In *The End of Evolution: On Mass Extinctions and the Preservation of Biodiversity*, Dr. Peter Douglas Ward, a renowned scientist whose specialties include the biology of mass extinctions, astrobiology, paleontology, and geology, describes the two greatest mass extinctions in the history of our planet, and compares them to the mass extinction presently occurring in our world, one which began around 100,000 years ago and has eradicated countless species ever since.

He describes for us the crystal-clear waters of the Philippine archipelago, now a marine graveyard eerily empty of sea life; a lush Hawaiian paradise whose native life has suffered a devastating depopulation and mass extinction; the great Columbia River of the Pacific Northwest, bereft of its once-abundant salmon, and now an empty series of dammed lakes; wolves, once numbering in the millions in North America, now reduced to maybe 2,000 individuals. He gives us a roll-call of the dead over a hundred thousand years, ranging from the mighty mammoths, short-faced bears, sabre-toothed cats, and other fauna indigenous to North America all of which have perished during the range of time in which *Homo sapiens* has lived upon the Earth.

Twice in the distant past, enormous, catastrophic extinctions have devastated the Earth, bringing about the end of evolution -- extinctions -- for vast numbers of creatures, and the beginning of new species, genera, even families, orders, and classes of organisms. The first took place a quarter of a billion years ago, marking the extinction of 90 percent or more of all multicellular life on Earth and opening the way for the evolution of the first true mammals and the eventual advent of *Homo sapiens sapiens*, modern human beings. The second took place 65 million years ago, entailing the extinction of at least 50 percent of all species then existing on Earth, including the last of the non-avian dinosaurs, the causes of which likely included a giant asteroid or comet impact in the area that is now the Yucatan in Mexico as well as the poisoning of Earth's atmosphere by gigantic flood basalt eruptions in the Deccan area of what would become the subcontinent India, coupled with climate change brought about by those same eruptions. Now Peter Ward searches for the clues to these horrendous events, on a journey that takes him to several continents and island archipelagos as well as far back in time, to the scenes of these two mass extinction events. His reason for doing so is urgent and terrifying, for he and many other distinguished scientists have documented strong evidence that a third, gigantic mass extinction has also begun on our world. Could the primary cause of that Third Event have begun 100,000 years ago, with the impact of another wandering, destructive, fire-bearing "asteroid" named *Homo sapiens*?

Ward's journey progresses from fossil hunting in the Karoo Desert of South Africa to dinosaur trails and fossils in Hell Creek, Montana, to rich fossil beds in France and New Mexico and Hawaii and the Petrified Forest of Arizona, and finally to the remote Caucasus Mountains of Soviet Georgia. At each stop along the way, he documents the rich diversity of life now endangered by climate change and the world's burgeoning human population.

The urgency and poignancy of his quest is highlighted by his own words near the end of *The End of Evolution*:

"I have a son. He is tall and gangly, with a face speckled by a galaxy of freckles. He is mischievous and playful, willful and happy, the normal mix of boyish hopes, dreams, and emotions. He is precious to me beyond belief.

"I keep having this vision of living with him in the Amazon rain forest, where we exist in a small hovel no different from that inhabited by a fifth of humanity. And in this dream, my son is hungry. Behind our house sits one last patch of forest, and in that pristine copse is the nest of a beautiful bird, the last nest, it so happens, of that species. This vision is a nightmare to me, because even knowing that these birds are the last of their race, I don't have the slightest doubt what my actions would be. To feed my son, to keep him alive, I would do whatever I had to do, including destroying the last of another species.

"Anyone who thinks he or she might do otherwise is probably not a parent. There are a great number of parents currently on the earth, and many more on the way." -- Peter D. Ward, *The End of Evolution* (1994), pp. 271-272

There are currently more than seven billion human beings alive on Earth. It has been projected that by 2050 there will be more than nine billion people on our world, and by 2100 there could be some eleven billion people in existence. Unless something happens to damp down human reproduction, as in Dan Brown's *Inferno*, and/or cuts the global human population down to .05 of its current size, as in Stephen King's *The Stand*, soon we will be living on a world populated almost entirely by human beings -- and few, if any, other living creatures. So far, Ward and many other biological scientists have stated the problem elegantly, but when it comes to solutions, all are more or less unsatisfactory for a variety of reasons. I am decidedly *not* in favor of applying Communist China's remedy for overpopulation to the rest of the world; indeed, I would heartily cheer if China no longer suffered the oppression of the commissars and her people could do as they Willed to do in matters of family size and everything else, *a la* Aleister Crowley's *Liber 77*.

On the other hand, the right to swing one's fist ends where the point of the jaw of the global life-support system that keeps us all alive begins. Maybe our best shot is to pray for a global disaster that vastly reduces Earth's human population without involving human dictators and oppressive governments. No matter what, *The End of Evolution* brilliantly and persuasively lays out its case that we have arrived at a point at which we either find a way to reduce our species's impact on the rest of Earth's life, or suffer a catastrophic loss of most of that life -- as well as human life, as people die of starvation, pestilence, and war over dwindling and increasingly scarce resources.

Jorget says

Jorget: I have to agree with Roger (<https://www.goodreads.com/review/show...>), it is a great book, well written and exposing many connections I was not quite aware off. As a biologist with a recently developed interest in geology I have found this book scientifically fascinating. I understand "the black fugue" any thinking person would get when considering the magnitude and speed of the third major extinction. But what one can do about it? I generally go to our thriving garden, an oasis of green in the parched Australian bush, and admire what nature can do with a bit of water ...

The biggest thing for me is the time scale of the third extinction. It started about 100,000 years from the present when the humans slowly emerged. This was twenty times longer then our recorded history. Then the process speeded-up when the flint tool made humans into skilled megafauna hunters until practically all the

big beasts were gone at the end of the last ice age 12,000 years ago. Metal tools were even better for clearing forests for primitive agriculture, for hunting wild animals and killing people in endless wars. The human population growth and environment destruction was relatively slow for thousands of years because the animal or human muscle power was the most important source of the mechanical energy - until 1800s. From that time, thanks to cheap energy from fossil fuels, the world population and corresponding destruction took off and is still accelerating. The climate change, when powered by the slow drift of the ancient continents took millions of years. Similar level of the climate change today, powered by our huge energy needs, has telescoped into decades and years. Nobody knows how this will play out in the future. So we prefer to ignore it.

This book was published in 1994 - that is thirty years ago. At that time we were slightly worried about our car culture and built-in obsolescence world. Peter Ward was encouraged by some positive signs from the Rio de Janeiro environmental summit. He thought that there might be some hope. Today we have probably even more cars and subconsciously assume that exponential economic growth is the only available option or so our leaders tell us.

So looking back at the history of the human civilisation we have to conclude that it always has been an irrational, opportunistic mess, right from the beginning. Yet, great things have been achieved. The majority of people in the first world countries have quite reasonable standard of living. We are even starting to understand what killed the dinosaurs 65 million years ago!

Sibby says

A really amazing book - so far the only work of non fiction to bring me to tears.

Keith Akers says

I had earlier read and liked Ward's book, "The Medea Hypothesis," and was impressed by the way he explained things as well as his original ways of looking at the evidence. I read this book because I wanted to know about biodiversity.

Ward explains extinction basically by looking at the history of extinctions and the three great extinctions, as he puts it. He is quite objective and while he does have ideas on this or that subject, he does not have a pet point of view which he pushes to the exclusion of all others. He gives the arguments for both sides and the history of our understanding of the subject.

The main things I didn't like about the book are that he actually doesn't talk very much about the preservation of biodiversity or its relevance. He does discuss them, though. After you read the rest of the book, though, you get a sense of why he doesn't do this, although I wish he had been more explicit about it. I think he doesn't see the decline of biodiversity as a direct threat to human existence; it's more of a moral issue.

I notice, also, that not too many books are being written about biodiversity these days. Why is that, do you suppose? I think it's because the discussion of biodiversity has ceased to be a fashionable subject, and because it's so complex that it's hard to answer questions like "how bad is it?" or "is humanity in peril because of biodiversity decline?" After reading Ward's book, you don't get answers to these questions, but

you do get a sense of why these questions are hard to answer.

Roger says

This is, by all accounts a fascinating book. Ward, a paleontologist, does a fair job of describing the previous mass extinctions that have visited the earth and of analogizing them to the present one, human-caused and comparative in scope. Unfortunately, the book suffers from one of the most egregious examples of last-chapter-syndrome I've ever seen, in which Ward, after describing the absolutely horrific pace of species annihilation humans have unleashed, spends a month or so in "a black fugue" of depression and is plucked from it by some random child offering him a glass of tea. Proof that all humans have to do is wait and hope will spring eternal, even from barren, salted soil. An unfortunate conclusion.
