

The Future of Life
Edward O. Wilson

The future of life

Surprisingly unbalanced for a book with such all-encompassing ambition

Wilson's greatest concern is for biodiversity, preventing the extinction of species. A prerequisite for preserving diversity of species is preserving habitats. He advocates both. A whole range of strategies for preserving endangered species, including laws, captive breeding programs, and even cryogenic preservation of the genetic material of creatures that are doomed to extinction.

Ecosystems are different game. The best way to preserve them is via laws and by outright purchase. He is a big fan of the Nature Conservancy, which takes the very direct approach of buying up the pristine wildernesses of the world. He admits, that doesn't go into much detail about what to do about it, that setting up a nature reserve side by side with villages full of hungry people in underdeveloped countries is not really going to work. The people will invade your preserve and take bush meat despite your best efforts to stop them. Nevertheless, he is on the side of the angels, and the organizations to which he gives copious credit in the book are indeed deserving.

He tiptoes around the biggest issue, that of consumption in the rich countries. Everything we do to support our lifestyles damages the environment. While he is pretty good about talking about the environmental impact of our preference for meat over grains, he does not go into the cost of our proclivity for building large homes located a long way from anywhere. It results in cutting forests for timber, destroying farmland for home sites and roads, and asphaltting things over to the point where the ground cannot breathe. Likewise, our gargantuan appetite for stuff demands huge mines to get raw materials and huge consumption of carbon and fouling of the waters to manufacture and distribute everything.

The solution that Wilson does embrace is fewer children. In the decade since he wrote the book the Western world has tilted way below replacement level fertility, 2.1 children per woman. He doesn't even talk about which people have children. It is not the people who are likely to read his book. University educated women, whom one hopes are the smartest and society, are the least likely to have large families. We are falling to zero population growth the wrong way, with the people who are smart enough to understand why it is important being the ones who are deciding not to have kids. At a minimum, the issue is more complex than he lets on.

I'll close in saying something I like about the book. Biodiversity is a bit of a hard sell. As Wilson himself notes, whether or not the ivory billed woodpecker is extinct makes no difference whatsoever in the life of anybody living. The preservation of species is largely a moral issue. He would like to say that we have received an endowment from mother nature herself, and certainly from our forebears, and we have an obligation to pass it on as close to intact as we can. Why? So our grandchildren can enjoy walking

through a Costa Rican rain forest and marveling at the diversity of colorful frogs and gorgeous orchids just as we can. So they can wake up some spring morning and hear the frogs croaking in a pond near their house.

Beyond that, Wilson does as good a job as I have seen in providing a financial justification for preserving biodiversity. Biodiversity implies that there are a number of species in a habitat, which means that if one of them gets in trouble there are others to fill in the gaps. My example would be the way that several species of oaks have filled in the niche formerly filled by chestnuts in eastern US forests. The chestnuts are gone, a tragedy, but we still have climax forest up and down the East Coast. In fact, we have more and more of it as the forest reclaims marginal farmland that has been abandoned. He also explains at length the value of biodiversity, or at least the availability of a vast number of species, for medical research.

Wilson starts out with a wonderfully lyrical open letter to Henry Thoreau, but the style gets rather pedestrian once he gets into the meat of his argument. The book should get five stars because he is so clearly on the side of the angels. However, I think this is less than his best work. It is a bit tedious. So for the writing, not the ideas, I give it only four.