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Dead Serious: Wild Hope Amid the Sixth Extinction

Eli J. Knapp
Torrey House Press (Sep 21, 2021)
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Clever prose and gifted storytelling enliven Eli J. Knapp's *Dead Serious*, a weighty book about how species are being steamrolled toward extinction that nonetheless argues that a better future is possible.

Knapp, a self-branded "nature snoop" who always has his binoculars on hand, organizes his stories around the eighteen extinction factors outlined in an influential 1983 essay by Michael Soulé. His diverting descriptions of flora and fauna lead into captivating lessons about biological principles, all of which are embellished with humor and personal anecdotes. A dramatic account of seeking scenic beauty, and ending up camping near the hibernation site of timber rattlesnakes, is used to discuss rarity and species' habitats, for example.

Elsewhere, a backpacking trip in Hawaii that included the observation of honeycreepers is used to illustrate the notion of the reduction of mutualist populations: the birds and a single lobelia species evolved to be mutually dependent on each other for food and pollination, Knapp shows. Accounts of years spent studying and living in the Serengeti, meanwhile, balance Knapp's passion for wildlife conservation with his understanding of how poachers and subsistence farmers live adjacent to animal preserves that need better economic supports.

Also present are tales of popular megafauna, like cheetahs and rhinoceroses, and endearing creatures, like pileated woodpeckers and giant tortoises. Vibrant accounts from Knapp's academic career are mixed with tales about other naturalists' discoveries, including those of Charles Darwin, Thomas Jefferson, and Teddy Roosevelt.

Though it admits that there is much to be alarmed about when it comes to the sixth extinction, *Dead Serious* is a rousing read that expresses hope that there is still time to work to restore the balance between the human and natural worlds.

RACHEL JAGARESKI (May / June 2021)

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