

Life in the Balance: Humanity and the Biodiversity Crisis

Niles Eldredge

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For those of us who still don't "get" the vital connection between preservation of biodiversity and the continued well-being of human beings on the planet, LIFE IN THE BALANCE: Humanity and the Biodiversity Crisis by Niles Eldredge offers a brilliant and clearly articulated explanation of why that connection matters very much indeed. Using a conversational style that's as accessible as dining table chat, Eldredge sets out to answer four distinct questions: 1. What is biodiversity? 2. Why should we care about it? 3. What precisely threatens biodiversity? 4. What can we do to stem the tide of the "6th Extinction?"

Using the Okavango Delta in Africa as the only remaining example of a "primordial Eden" on earth, Eldredge, chief curator of the American Museum of Natural History's new Hall of Biodiversity and author of numerous books, including The Miner's Canary, Fossils, and Time Frames: The Evolution of Punctuated Equilibria, warns of an impending massive sixth extinction that would have catastrophic consequences for life as we know it on this planet. The tremendous breadth of his knowledge, coupled with the clear organization of the text and many beautiful black and white hand rendered illustrations by Patricia Wynne, make this book an ideal teaching tool, as well as a darn good read for the lay person.

Eldredge's cogent and graceful explanation doesn't exactly break new ground (E.O Wilson's The Diversity of Life, listed as a "must read" in Eldredge's bibliography, went into even greater depth on the subject, sounding similar warnings). Yet he makes his case with a concise urgency that causes all of us to sit up and pay attention. Too bad humans are wrapped in so much denial; Eldredge has an explanation — we've learned to live completely outside of our ecosystems, believing ourselves truly detached from nature. But he is also careful to not leave us paralyzed with pre-apocalyptic horror and apathy. He proposes six steps we can take now towards averting the crisis, including utilizing our existing expertise in conservation, striking a balance between human economic needs and the continued healthy existence of ecosystems and species, and developing a political will and agenda.

While these are straightforward and self-evident steps, he is somewhat short on the how-to of it all. However, that would carry us away from his brilliant and lucid discussion of biodiversity into the murkier world of public policy and politics. Yet, it is a discussion that must go hand in hand with Eldredge's work. Perhaps in the next book.

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