

# Discounting the Future

Book Review by Michael W. Masters

*The loss of the ivory-billed woodpecker has had no discernable effect on American prosperity. A rare flower or moss could vanish from the Catskill forest without diminishing the region's filtration capacity. But so what? To evaluate individual species by their known practical value at the present time is business accounting in the service of barbarism.*

— E. O. Wilson, *The Future of Life*

In his prescient 1977 essay, *The Limits of Altruism, An Ecologist's View of Survival*, biologist Garrett Hardin noted that “no civilization has ever recovered after ruining its environment.” This may seem of academic interest when invoking the deforestation of ancient Mesopotamia or the role of lead waterways in eroding Roman fertility. But, these cases have something in common that distinguishes them from modern ecological disasters — they were localized in space and time. Ancients knew nothing of global warming or world-wide nuclear winter. Virgin lands provided sanctuary from which recovery and renewal could radiate.

Not so today. Thanks to “globalization,” humanity now has the power to wreak havoc on a vast, and possibly irreversible, scale.

Four decades ago, Rachel Carson's best seller, *Silent Spring*, energized the environmental movement with her indictment of pesticides and their impact on wildlife. Now, at the turn of a new century, Edward O. Wilson, respected biologist and chronicler of the science of sociobiology, has upped the ante with his latest book, *The Future of Life*. Wilson's book is far more comprehensive than *Silent Spring*, tracing the imperiling

---

*Michael W. Masters writes on issues of politics, history, moral philosophy, and sociobiology. He is a frequent contributor to The Social Contract.*

of nature to its root cause — as liberals might put it. The ultimate danger to earth's biosphere arises from an exploding human population that exhibits little regard for the long term health of the world we live in — a phenomenon that Professor Hardin called discounting the future.

## Breed for Greed

For starters, there are simply more of people than is healthy for the planet. World population passed six billion in 1999, growing at a rate that Wilson describes as bacterial rather than primate. While prosperity and birth control have brought declining fertility rates in the developed world — and, optimists hope, eventually in the emerging world — numbers will continue to rise for many decades under even the most optimistic assumptions. The crest may exceed ten billion by the next century.

Even worse than sheer numbers is the fact that our viewpoint is almost exclusively focused on short-term economic gain regardless of long-term consequences. To economists and transnational corporate moguls, the world is an inexhaustible cornucopia of ever-expanding production and consumption. Greed is the chief value system. No one seems to care what

will become of the world once industrial pollution, deforestation, loss of habitat, depletion of the ocean's whale and fishing stocks and other forms of exploitation have run their course.

But, they should. Wilson cites estimates that while the combined gross national product of the entire world was some \$18 trillion in 1997, the financial value of “all the ecosystems services provided humanity free of charge by the living natural environment” was \$33 trillion. Providing these services after the environment is ruined will surely cost more than conserving them in the first place — as New York City once discovered.

Confronted with over-development and looming ruin of the Catskill Mountains watershed — and its free water filtration service — New Yorkers faced a choice: spend up to \$8 billion on a filtration plant (plus annual

**The Future of Life**  
by  
Edward O. Wilson  
New York: Alfred A. Knopf  
229 pages, \$22.00



operating costs) or restore the Catskills for \$1 billion. In this case, the ecologically sound choice was also the less costly one — a tradeoff that is not always so clear cut.

Nor do we have forever to solve this problem. Two million species have been identified by scientists — out of an estimated five to 100 million. But their numbers are

---

*“At the present rate, one fifth of all species will be extinct or beyond saving by 2030. At the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a staggering one-half of all species will have vanished.”*

---

declining precipitously. The rate of extinction today is estimated at 1000 to 10,000 times that prior to the advent of humans. Before *Homo sapiens*, roughly one species per million per year disappeared, about the same as the rate at which new species evolved. At the present rate, one fifth of all species will be extinct or beyond saving by 2030. At the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a staggering one-half of all species will have vanished.

Not without reason does Wilson entitle his second chapter, “The Planetary Killer.” One is left to wonder, at what point our distant grandchildren will inherit an asphalt-paved planet suitable only for starlings, flies and weeds?

### Ignoble Savages

The West is hardly blameless for this problem — though it often escapes notice that concern for the environment is largely a Western invention, pioneered by American conservationists such as Teddy Roosevelt. However, while the West’s impact on the environment may have been magnified by the efficiency of Western technology, our position is by no means unique. In fact, peoples of almost all cultures have displayed a remarkable talent for devouring “the big, the slow and the tasty.”

When Australia’s first aboriginal “immigrants” arrived “down under” 50,000+ years ago, the continent abounded with 23 foot long “monitor lizards similar to the present-day Komodo dragons.” There were “creatures vaguely resembling giant sloths, rhinoceroses, and lions,

as well as oversized kangaroos and a horned terrestrial tortoise the size of a small automobile.” Soon after the aborigines arrived, “and evidently no later than 40,000 years ago, the megafauna had vanished.”

The influx of Arab traders after about A.D. 700 brought devastation to Madagascar, killing in its wake all native species of “mammals, birds and reptiles above 10 kilograms (roughly 20 pounds).”

When the Maori first waded ashore on New Zealand in the thirteenth century, they found a “vast biological wonderland” populated with many species, the most interesting of which were the moas, “large flightless birds resembling ostriches and emus but independently evolved on these islands alone.” They ranged from the size of a turkey to the biggest (and tastiest) of all, the “prodigious *Dinornis giganteus* (‘gigantic terrible-bird’)” — nine feet tall and weighing over 300 lb.

*Then, like the sweep of a scythe, came the Maori. Spreading from the north to south, they butchered the moas in huge numbers and piled their bones conspicuously in hunting sites all over the islands. By the middle of the fourteenth century, a matter of a few decades, the moas were gone. . . . Possibly no more than a hundred colonists first arrived, and as few as a thousand were present when the last of the moas disappeared.*

Wrecking the environment, it seems, is a thoroughly multicultural enterprise. Wilson continues,

*[t]he somber archaeology of vanished species has taught us the following lessons:*

- *The noble savage never existed,*
- *Eden occupied was a slaughterhouse,*
- *Paradise found is paradise lost.*

### The China Example

Little has changed, and examples abound throughout the Third World as well as in the formerly communist countries of the now defunct Soviet empire. Most people know about the imperiled rain forests of Brazil, but few know that China is a major ecological crisis in the making. In order to feed its 1.2 billion people, China is forced “continually to design and redesign its lowland territories as one gigantic hydraulic system” of dams and canals. The Three Gorges dam and the planned Xiaolangdi dam are among the largest structures ever

conceived. But at what cost?

*Meanwhile, the surtax levied on the environment to support China's growth, although rarely entered on the national balance sheets, is escalating to a ruinous level. Among the most telling indicators is the pollution of water. Here is a measure worth pondering ...according to the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization, 80 percent [of China's major rivers] no longer support fish. The Yellow River is dead along much of its course, so fouled with chromium, cadmium, and other toxins from oil refineries, paper mills, and chemical plants as to be unfit for either human consumption or irrigation.*

### Back from the Brink

Wilson does not believe the battle is lost. His final chapter lays out a 12-point program of renewal that is visionary in scope. Saving the biosphere will require a concerted and world wide effort — drawing on the resources of government and the private sector as well as science and technology. The immediate focus must be on saving the most imperiled regions, among them Hawaii, the West Indies, Equador, Atlantic Brazil, West Africa, Madagascar, the Philippines, Indo-Burma, India, South Africa, and Australia.

Wilson suggests that conservation must be made profitable via, for example, tax credits and ecotourism. Furthermore, he urges a last ditch effort on the part of zoos and botanical gardens to actively breed endangered species. As an example, zoos around the world are starting the dolorous task of breeding and rearing Asian tigers in captivity, only a few thousand of which remain in the wild — victims of encroaching human populations and loss of the wilderness habitat they must have to survive.

### But What of Humanity?

Wilson studiously avoids certain subjects with environmental implications, among them Third World immigration into the West. After all, much of the current exploitation of the environment is taking place in the Third World — where emerging populations seek, perhaps justifiably, to ape the conspicuous consumerism of the West. Can the West indefinitely absorb such people without eventually becoming like them?

Perhaps Wilson's reticence to deal with this volatile

subject is understandable. His great integrating work, *Sociobiology* — postulating as it did a group-based genetic foundation for social behavior, both human and animal — brought him much unwelcome attention from the shrill neo-Marxists who control what passes for media in America.

Nonetheless, in Wilson's words we may infer a warning against another attack on earth's bio-diversity — the reshaping of humanity through immigration. It cannot have escaped notice that the paradoxical consequence of imposing diversity in one place is the eradication of diversity — through displacement, differential birth rates and mixing. Is the West to share the fate of the moas of New Zealand and the giant turtles of Australia? Wilson's warning about natural ecosystems applies equally well to humans: "mathematical models that attempt to describe the interactions of species in ecosystems show that ... high diversity can lower the stability of individual species."

Juxtapose this statement with declining Western birthrates and massive Third World immigration and one discovers yet another instance of disregard for the

---

*"Wilson suggests that conservation must be made profitable via, for example, tax credits and ecotourism. Furthermore, he urges a last ditch effort on the part of zoos and botanical gardens to actively breed endangered species."*

---

consequences of placing a fragile population in peril.

### Ethics vs Economics

Whether natural ecosystems or human, the problem is everywhere the same — exploitation of fragile and impermanent resources for the benefit of the shortsighted and greedy few. Eighteenth century mercantilists and nineteenth century robber barons can't hold a candle to twenty-first century globalists. Writes Wilson,

*What humanity is inflicting on itself and Earth is, to use a modern metaphor, the result of a mistake in capital investment. Having appropriated the planet's natural resources, we chose to annuitize them with a short-term maturity reached by progressively increasing payout."*

He adds,

*But there is a problem: the key elements of natural capital, Earth's arable land, ground water, forests, marine fisheries, and petroleum, are ultimately finite, and not subject to proportionate capital growth. Moreover, they are being decapitalized by overharvesting and environmental destruction. With population and consumption continuing to grow, the per-capita resources left to be harvested are shrinking. The long-term prospects are not promising.*

Where do we look for a solution? "The new strategy to save the world's fauna and flora begins, as in all human affairs, with ethics." The first step is to strip away the deceptive moralizing that blinds us. As Wilson observes, "We are daily soaked in self-righteous gossip. . . even the tyrant is sterling in prose, invoking patriotism and economic necessity to justify his misdeeds."

Just so. The same people who rape the environment in the name of economics also flood the West with aliens in order to secure cheap labor — all the while shrieking "racist" and "xenophobe" at anyone who opposes the destruction of their native habitat. This is not moral behavior, nor is opposing it immoral.

According to the Roman historian Tacitus, on the eve of the Battle of Mons Grapius, the Caledonian leader, Calgacus, told his warriors (one day to be known as Scots) that their Roman opponents had "made of the world a desert and called it peace." Perhaps it is time to stake today's corporate looters in the hot sun of the desert they have created and loose the "giant terrible-bird" on them. •

#### Immigration Numbers for 2001

At the end of August, 2002, the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) released its legal immigration statistics for 2001.

In 2001, the U.S. admitted 1,064,318 legal immigrants. This is 65 percent higher than 1999 admissions, and 25 percent higher than 2000 admissions. It is the highest admissions number since the IRCA-admission years of 1989-1991. If one excludes IRCA admissions, it is the highest annual admission since 1914. Only eight years have had higher admissions: the Ellis Island years of 1906, 1907, 1910, 1913, and 1914, and the IRCA years of 1989, 1990, and 1991.

Of the 1,064,318 legal immigrants admitted in 2001, only 39 percent were new admissions; 61 percent were foreign citizens already here as either non-immigrants or illegal aliens who adjusted their status. This is due to INS processing of backlogged applications for adjustment of status (presumably a large share of them under Section 245(i)). The INS predicts even higher numbers in 2002.

Of 2001 admissions, 64 percent were relatives, 17 percent were employment immigrants and their dependent relatives, 10 percent were refugees or asylees, 4 percent were visa lottery admissions, and the remainder were admissions under various minor categories.

The number of admissions of immediate relatives — the unlimited category that has been growing due to effects of chain migration — rose to 443,964, its highest level ever.

Of all legal admissions in 2001, 19.4 percent were immigrants from Mexico, 6.6 percent from India, 5.3 percent from China, 5 percent from the Philippines, and 3.3 percent from Vietnam.

The top ten source-countries (Mexico, India, China, Philippines, Vietnam, El Salvador, Cuba, Haiti, Bosnia, Canada) accounted for 51.9 percent of all admissions in 2001.

As in every year since 1971, the top destination states for legal immigrants in 2001 were California, New York, Florida, Texas, New Jersey, and Illinois. These six states are the destinations for 65 percent of all admissions in 2001.

— Source: The Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), research by Scipio Garling