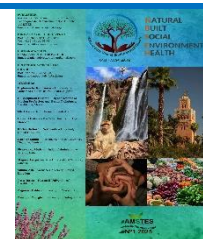




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BOOK REVIEW

Before They Vanish: Saving Nature's Populations—and Ourselves, edited by *Paul R. Ehrlich, Gerardo Ceballos, and Rodolfo Dirzo*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024, 320 pp., \$29.95 (hardback), ISBN: 978-1-4214-4969-2.

It has always been easier to condemn tragedies once they belong to the past—always after the fact, when the damage has already been done. In this work, Ehrlich, Ceballos and Dirzo boldly sound the alarm in time. The question is whether people will act to preserve endangered species before it is too late and before the consequences weigh heavily on ecosystems. The authors emphasise that the issue extends beyond mere environmental concerns; it is a fundamental challenge for humanity itself. Saving biodiversity also means protecting the conditions of our existence, often without realising it. The urgency is real, and the book urges action before disaster becomes irreversible, while populations can still be saved (p. 128).

From the very first pages, we are plunged into a gripping narrative that blends exploration, discovery, and tragedy. Vitus Bering's expedition in the 18th century (pp. 1-6), with all its details, invites us to grasp its lesson and engage in deep reflection on the multiple causes of past and future extinctions of species. After all, it is by understanding these causes that we can find solutions.

Gradually, awareness intensifies—everyone is, in fact, concerned: yet the sixth extinction is advancing. The authors demonstrate an unprecedented rate of species disappearance, far faster than that observed during past biological crises. Rising temperatures, ocean acidification, and man-made pollution are affecting the living conditions of countless species. Are we doomed to suffer the same fate as the species once discovered, then wiped out by trophic cascades, as in the five previous mass extinctions caused by natural disasters? Today, what we are experiencing is the result of our own actions—the product of our own hands.

The book recounts, through a poignant narrative, that once upon a time, there was a continent—the cradle of humanity—where *Homo sapiens* emerged about 300,000 years ago. Within these conditions, our ancestors learned to integrate into their environment without disrupting it—a land rich in biodiversity, teeming with diverse flora and fauna. Yet, other territories existed, just beyond. Driven by an insatiable curiosity, *Homo sapiens* decided to leave

Africa, its first continent, to explore these new lands—territories unprepared for its arrival (pp. 1-14). This highly intelligent predator chose to force its adaptation, exert a dominant influence, and impose a way of life born of its own imagination—unleashing a massive wave of extinctions.

Several magnificent birds have completely vanished. Species such as the moas (*Dinornithiformes*) in New Zealand (p. 14), the dodo (*Raphus cucullatus*) from the islands of the Indian Ocean (pp. 14-18), and the passenger pigeon (*Ectopistes migratorius*) (pp. 18, 69) have all fallen victim to extinction. So have certain mammals. Indeed, the dark record of extinction highlights the disappearance of the thylacine (*Thylacinus cynocephalus*) and the Bramble Cay melomys (*Melomys rubicola*), the latter being recognised as the first documented case of a mammal's extinction directly caused by contemporary climate change (p. 17).

And so, the authors compile an extensive list of species that have vanished, including amphibians, reptiles, and mammals (p. 80), as well as vertebrates as a whole (pp. 80-98) and invertebrates (p. 125), not to mention plant species (pp. 131-144), eliminated by deforestation, climate change, and the introduction of invasive species (p. 140). The authors reconstruct, like detectives, the sequence of events that led to these extinctions (p. 79), scrutinising fossilised clues and every trace left behind. Each lost species has its own meticulously documented case file, and with every page, a new culprit is unveiled.

The number one culprit—the most powerful of all—is Man, the great predator (p. 36), the serial killer with varied methods (p. 39), the poacher (p. 176), the faceless industrialist who, though he does not wield a weapon (p. 187), is nonetheless responsible for a massive decline through his factories (p. 188). He clears hectares of jungle (p. 227), poisons the air and water, drains groundwater reserves, depletes fertile soils, and devours the Earth's resources (pp. 131-145). His thirst for accumulating wealth is like a desert swallowing a river.

He is the master of global warming—through his carbon emissions, he burns the planet's lungs, heats the oceans, and disrupts biodiversity. He introduces invasive species, rewrites the rules of evolution, decides which animals will survive in his farms and which will perish, enclosing them until they disappear (p. 178).

Yet, healthy nature shelters us, nourishes us, protects us, heals us, purifies our air and water, and regulates the climate (pp. 166-189). Every individual, every species, every plant serves mankind—this has been the deeply rooted belief since the dawn of civilization, and so it remains. But without them, our harvests collapse, our rivers dry up, and our delicate balances are shattered (p. 146). And still, we mistreat them, exploit them, as if they could never fail us. How far will we go before we understand—before we ensure the right change?

The authors take us into another dimension, allowing us to observe with great precision our total dependence on our smallest yet most powerful allies (pp. 6, 7, 145-156): microbes—now threatened by intensive agriculture, pesticides, and pollution. They brilliantly succeed in exposing the major risks associated with their collapse. A dark future looms ahead: the COVID-19 pandemic was merely a warning (pp. 151, 152). Is there an emergency exit, a way to make amends before it is too late? Yes, apparently, according to this book. But, are we truly ready to implement these best solutions? (p. 205).

Like a breath stirring the dust of the past, *Before They Vanish* confronts us with our responsibility. It takes inventory of the species wiped out, urging us to listen to their silence, hear their stories, understand their absence—and, above all, to act in order to prevent an even greater catastrophe. This book is The Codex of Lost Life. It provides essential insights and irrefutable evidence for those who refuse to remain mere spectators, passively awaiting extinction. Read this book!

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