



Extinction: A Radical History

Ashley Dawson

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“Dawson's searing report on species loss will sober up anyone who has drunk the Kool Aid of green capitalism. For a bonus, readers will learn a lot from his far-sighted, prehistoric survey of extinction.”
—Andrew Ross, author of *Creditocracy and the Case for Debt Refusal*

Some thousands of years ago, the world was home to an immense variety of large mammals. From woolly mammoths and saber-toothed tigers to giant ground sloths and armadillos the size of automobiles, these spectacular creatures roamed freely. Then human beings arrived. Devouring their way down food chain as they spread across the planet, they began a process of voracious extinction that has continued to the present.

Headlines today are made by the existential threat confronting remaining large animals such as rhinos and pandas. But the devastation summoned by humans extends to humbler realms of creatures including beetles, bats and butterflies. Researchers generally agree that the current extinction rate is nothing short of catastrophic. Currently the earth is losing about a hundred species every day.

This relentless extinction, Ashley Dawson contends in a primer that combines vast scope with elegant precision, is the product of a global attack on the commons, the great trove of air, water, plants and creatures, as well as collectively created cultural forms such as language, that have been regarded traditionally as the inheritance of humanity as a whole.

This attack has its genesis in the need for capital to expand relentlessly into all spheres of life. Extinction, Dawson argues, cannot be understood in isolation from a critique of our economic system. To achieve this we need to transgress the boundaries between science, environmentalism and radical politics. *Extinction: A Radical History* performs this task with both brio and brilliance.

Extinction: A Radical History Details

Date : Published April 22nd 2016 by OR Books

ISBN :

Author : Ashley Dawson

Format : Paperback 132 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Science, History, Biology, Ecology, Politics, Environment, Nature

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From Reader Review Extinction: A Radical History for online ebook

David Spanagel says

A powerful indictment of capitalism informs this succinct analysis of the current extinctions phenomenon.

Jennifer says

This book requires a fair amount of background knowledge, some of which I didn't have. It's a brutal look at how capitalism could be contributing to (causing, he would say) mass modern extinctions. A small book, and one not to miss even if you disagree with his thesis.

Carrie Laben says

This was awkward. I am very much in sympathy with much of the book's overall thesis, having come independently to the conclusion that our present economic system leaves room for only limited efforts to protect biodiversity and the ecosystems that sustain our species - but the weak editing and fact-checking really threw me off and, I fear, would make the whole book easy to dismiss if I was a more hostile audience.

Erica says

Extinction: a Radical History reads more like an essay than a book. Overall the writing style is a bit preachy and quite dry just as I imagine most student essays.

When purchasing this book I was under the impression that the central theme would be extinction. However, after reading this book it appears the central theme is capitalism and its influence on nature. Make no mistake, a great portion of this book is political not scientific, historic, or nature based. This was extremely disappointing.

Furthermore, the author often shortchanges the reader by offering opinions without leading the reader through sufficient evidence to support his claim. Many times there is no evidentiary support within the text at all. This leaves the reader doing all the legwork of cross-referencing every supposition this author makes ultimately making this book a frustrating read and leading me to wonder what purpose if any this book served.

Josiah says

A quick read. Makes the case that humans have been causing extinction for about as long as we've had language, especially written language. Goes on to discuss various conservation methods, and criticizes

capitalism for using them to further exploit the environment, rather than actually do it any good.

Mia says

A head on analysis of how capitalism lead to the mass extinction we are now driving.

<< Nature, the wonderfully abundant and diverse wild life of the world, is essentially a free pool of goods and labor that capital can draw on. As critics such as Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have argued, aggressive policies of trade liberalization in recent decades have been predicated on privatizing the commons—transforming ideas, information, species of plants and animals, and even DNA into private property. Suddenly, things like seeds, once freely traded by peasant farmers the world over, have become scarce commodities, and are even being bred by agribusiness corporations to be sterile after one generation, a product farmers in the global South have aptly nicknamed “suicide seeds.” The destruction of global biodiversity needs to be framed, in other words, as a great, and perhaps ultimate, attack on the planet’s common wealth. Indeed, extinction needs to be seen, along with climate change, as the leading edge of contemporary capitalism’s contradictions. >>

<< Capitalism is not necessarily more immoral than previous social systems with regard to cruelty to humans and the gratuitous destruction of nature. As a mode of production and a social system, however, capitalism requires people to be destructive of the environment. Three destructive aspects of the capitalist system stand out when we view this system in relation to the extinction crisis: 1) capitalism tends to degrade the conditions of its own production; 2) it must expand ceaselessly in order to survive; 3) it generates a chaotic world system, which in turn intensifies the extinction crisis. >>

<< De-extinction offers a seductive but dangerously deluding techno-fix for an environmental crisis generated by the systemic contradictions of capitalism. It is not simply that de-extinction draws attention—and economic resources—away from other efforts to conserve biodiversity as it currently exists. The fundamental problem with de-extinction is that it relies on the thoroughgoing manipulation and commodification of nature, and as such dovetails perfectly with biocapitalism. US lawyers have already begun arguing that revived species such as the mammoth would be “products of human ingenuity,” and should therefore be eligible for patenting. >>

<< It has been said that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to envisage the overthrow of capitalism. I would respond to this aphorism from dark times that it is easier to imagine the end of capitalism than it is to articulate any other genuine solution to the extinction crisis. If capitalism is the ultimate cause and prime engine of the extinction crisis, surely we can only conclude that we may find hope in challenging its baleful power with all means at our disposal. Capitalism is not eternal; it is a specific economic system grounded in a set of historically particular economic arrangements and social values. It came onto the world stage relatively recently, and, one way or another, it will eventually make an exit >>

Organicbyte says

This book is a bit ridiculous.

It less about extinction and more about blaming extinction on capitalism. The author cherry picks facts and

idea to conclude the only solution is for a "radical anti-capitalist conservation movement". The book takes an overly simplistic view of the issue to form its conclusions. Reintroduce the Woolly Mammoth to the Great Plains (aka Pleistocene rewilding), is not going to solve extinction.

Randall Wallace says

Now that with President Trump, the threat of climate based and/or nuclear extinction will be even more alarmingly real, it's good to read up on this new book which posits that capitalism will make us go extinct. The Romans refused to do sustainable agriculture, and now much of the North African desert and Sicily lies testament to Western Civilization's modus operandi of destroying one's land base and then doing the same to adjacent areas (see Derrick Jensen, Culture of Make Believe). "The Roman Empire was probably responsible for the greatest annihilation of large animals since the Pleistocene megafauna mass extinction." Dawson discusses ideologies of domination like John Locke's notions that God intended the land for those "industrious and rational". You learn how most the world's problems came into sharp focus under capitalism which introduced "enclosure, imperialism, warfare and ecocide". Sadly, capitalism thrives on what kills the planet, making it, like the use of fossil fuels, only a short-term panacea. It explains why Elizabeth Kolbert got it wrong on her book on extinction. In the end this book meshes exactly with Naomi Klein's book, This Changes Everything; both books clearly show it is game over for Planet Earth under capitalism. As I've said for years, Capitalism means cutting down the last tree to make the last box of Kleenex. Our only alternative to extinction has become radical political transformation.

Kristofer Petersen-Overton says

This book is a good primer on capitalism's role in generating the sixth extinction and the most interesting section contains a decent critique of techno-capitalist solutions to the environmental crisis. But I would have liked more... Dawson touches on a critique of Elizabeth Kolbert and the kind of conservationism that indicts humanity as a whole (most of the Anthropocene literature) and remains blind to structural causes. Frankly it should have been twice as long to address the issues sufficiently.

Ryan says

This was a quick and easy read, but quite an odd one. It does a good job summarizing the history of humanity's persecution and massacre of our fellow species in the opening chapters, but what came next was indeed radical, far too radical in my view. The author clearly has an axe to grind against neoliberal capitalism, putting the blame entirely on it and in the process contradicting his earlier chapters. Don't get me wrong, I am not fond of capitalism myself and agree it has been and continues to be a major force in the destruction of nature, but Dawson's view was simply too extreme even for me. Mankind has been driving animals to extinction long before the Neolithic, as evident in the Pleistocene extinction of megafauna. The invention and adoption of capitalism merely scaled up the intensity and efficiency of it all. The author's call for an end to capitalism is idealistic but quite impractical as there is as yet no viable alternative system that can support a human population of 7.5 billion and counting. For all its faults, one cannot imagine the scientific and industrial revolutions having taken place without the support of private enterprise and all it entailed. The portrayal of capitalism as entirely evil and irredeemable is overly simplistic to say the least.

Indeed, it is the runaway success of capitalism that is responsible for our proliferation as a species but will also be our ultimate downfall if we allow it to consume everything including ourselves.

So I'm afraid it's damned if we do and damned if we don't. Brace yourself for impact.

David Pocock says

Sobering overview of extinctions caused by homo sapiens. Interesting commentary on the intersection of colonialism, neoliberalism and the conservation agenda that has come out of this. The author paints with a broad brush but that's to be expected in a short book covering such a complex topic. The main premise is similar to that of Naomi Klein's analysis of capitalism and climate change, with the author arguing that preventing extinction is incompatible with capitalism as we know it.

Charlie Kruse says

particularly enjoyed the intersections of colonialism and capitalism. An overhaul of our socio-economic situation DEMANDS reparations to historically exploited people, such as those in the Global South. Interesting suggestions of providing a type of Universal Basic Income for indigenous people who live in biodiverse areas.

Josh says

An interesting call to arms, as it were, and very much a diatribe against neoliberal conservation efforts. Some of his conclusions (particularly in the early historical overview of mass extinctions) seem a bit too pithy, but it does offer an interesting way of reconsidering human effects on ecosystems (the Sumerian deforestation being reflected in the Epic of Gilgamesh I found especially fascinating, but I'm not sure that alone led to the modern-day deserts of Iraq and surrounding regions in the Fertile Crescent, as Dawson suggests).

Be warned: it's a brief book. The print page count is 130; my ebook version was only around 80 pages, including endnotes (the full text clocks in at around 65 ebook "pages"). I do not mention this as a slight against the book at all -- I quite like short books -- but it did leave me asking for more and wishing, at times, for a deeper dive into his examples and suggestions for moving forward.

Mike Lee says

Excellent review book and pocket read.

Curt says

Flawed. Boring. Unoriginal.

