



The Sixth Extinction: Patterns of Life and the Future of Humankind

Richard E. Leakey, Roger Lewin

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Richard Leakey, One Of The World's Foremost Experts On Man's Evolutionary Past, Now Turns His Eye To The Future And Doesn't Like What He Sees.

To the philosophical the earth is eternal, while the human race -- presumptive keeper of the world's history -- is a mere speck in the rich stream of life. It is known that nothing upon Earth is forever; geography, climate, and plant and animal life are all subject to radical change. On five occasions in the past, catastrophic natural events have caused mass extinctions on Earth. But today humans stand alone, in dubious distinction, among Earth's species: *Homo Sapiens* possesses the ability to destroy entire species at will, to trigger the sixth extinction in the history of life. In *The Sixth Extinction*, Richard Leakey and Roger Lewin consider how the grand sprawl of human life is inexorably wreaking havoc around the world. The authors of *Origins* and *Origins Reconsidered*, unimpeachable authorities on the human fossil record, turn their attention to the most uncharted anthropological territory of all: the future, and man's role in defining it. According to Leakey and Lewin, man and his surrounding species are end products of history and chance. Now, however, humans have the unique opportunity to recognize their influence on the global ecosystem, and consciously steer the outcome in order to avoid triggering an unimaginable upheaval.

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The Sixth Extinction: Patterns of Life and the Future of Humankind Details

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Bioteo says

Un saggio scritto con maestria dal grande paleoantropologo Richard Leakey e dal divulgatore scientifico Roger Lewin che tratta in modo estremamente approfondito il tema dell'estinzione. L'estinzione è un processo del tutto naturale che rientra nella vita evolutiva di ciascuna specie. Da quando è comparsa la vita sulla terra numerosissime specie si sono evolute e prima o poi sono andate incontro ad estinzione. Si stima che circa il 99.9% delle specie che siano mai esistite sul nostro pianeta si siano estinte. Talvolta questi processi di estinzione sono stati indotti da eventi catastrofici (5 eventi di estinzione di massa) causati da asteroidi o da altri processi geologici su scala planetaria. La comparsa dell'uomo ha però molto condizionato il destino delle altre specie. Fin dagli albori della nostra storia evolutiva l'espansione della specie Homo sapiens ha sancito l'estinzione della stragrande maggioranza della megafauna presente in quasi tutti i continenti, in seguito alla caccia e/o alla trasformazione dell'uso del suolo. Ma il processo di estinzione indotto dall'uomo ha avuto una grande accelerazione negli ultimi decenni. Attualmente si stima che l'estinzione degli organismi viventi sia da 100 a 1000 volte superiore rispetto alle condizioni naturali. Per questa ragione molti scienziati hanno chiamato questo fenomeno la "sesta estinzione di massa", insolita per la sua velocità ma soprattutto per la sua natura. E' la prima volta nella storia della vita sulla terra che il processo di estinzione di massa è causato da una singola specie dominante che ha la forza di diventare una potenza globale così violenta da mettere a repentaglio la sua stessa sopravvivenza. Saggio da leggere assolutamente per mettere a fuoco un processo fondamentale che ha condizionato e continuerà a condizionare le dinamiche evolutive del nostro pianeta.

Malissa says

One of the most profound, insightful and informative books that I have ever had the pleasure of reading. It gave me great pause to consider my own worldview, the past actions of our species and how we might prevent the continuing destruction of our planet's extraordinary biodiversity. Never in the 4.6 billion year history of the Earth have the number of species extinctions been so high as those at the hands of mankind in modern times.

Shannan says

Very interesting book with a sad, but intriguing concept. The author set out to visit not only animal and plant species on the verge of extinction, but also cultures, languages and other aspects of human culture that are quickly disappearing in our march toward globalization and sameness.

Aaron Rodriguez says

This book is comprehensive overview regarding earths past mass extinction events. The "sixth extinction"

according to Leaky and Lewin is an observable, consequential end game scenario for biodiversity. One of which is that, homo sapiens have become the only species to create an eminent, destructive environment by means of ecological habits and behaviors- however limited and or vast our ecological sense may be. This book is wake up call - message - that hopes to bring awareness of how delicate ecology and evolutionary biology is in time periods that stretch beyond the conscious awareness of Homo sapiens. As the most sentient species on this planet we have an obligation to wildlife management and conservation regarding the worlds biodiversity. I recommend this to anyone studying ecology, biology, anthropology, and or any other earth based science. Very well written, but at times can be confusing for people who aren't scientifically literate like myself. Never the less, it is a good read and very informative despite its publication date.

Steve says

Written in 1995, this book was unbelievably ahead of its time. Leaky explains how life started and evolved on earth, how natural events wiped the slate almost clean 5 times in the past, the most recent being 65 million years ago when the dinosaurs were wiped out, and how we're in the midst of a sixth extinction event caused by human activity.

Will says

:O well that was one of the best books I've ever read... It has opened my eyes to just how lucky we are to be alive, and how woefully ignorant we are to all creatures big and small. :D

Scott says

Here's what this book taught me, you can't best nature. Don't even bother trying.

Scott Rettberg says

This is a great companion to the recent "The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History" by Elizabeth Kolbert. I read this book based on a recent NY Times interview with TC Boyle, who recommended it, and it was time well-spent. While Kolbert's book is a really engaging trip into the history of extinction as such (as concept, science-story, discovery, debate, and present crisis), Leaky and Lewin's volume is the product of some deep work by two scientists with a lifetime invested in questions about where humans and other species came from, what distinguishes homo sapiens as a species (mostly, as it turns out, luck so far) and where it is headed (basically oblivion). This book takes a slow, measured look at the case of the present mass extinction and its root causes (homo sapiens). Really pretty devastating stuff. Basically, if you take the long term view, human exceptionalism (this world was made for us, we are God's creatures, etc.) has resulted in some pretty bad things. While post-industrial-revolution humans have done the most damage the most quickly (whatever, 100 or so species a day), the analysis in this book suggests that we have been at it for much longer. Pretty much take a diverse ecosystem, add humans, watch most of it die. Take the gentle Maori of New Zealand, who wiped out all the flightless birds. Consider the passenger pigeon, and the billions that streamed through the sky, 150 years ago, before we killed them all. Consider the early American settlers, who cherished the

Heath Hen on their tables, before killing it off altogether. And now, we extinguish species at a rate thousands times higher than background "natural" extinction rates would be. This book is excellent in the way that it builds slowly towards a convincing and awful conclusion. The current, sixth extinction, the Anthropocene, is a result of human activity, and it is moving very quickly. While modern humans came about at a time of great biodiversity, we are single-handedly killing off species at an unprecedented rate, accidentally and on purpose. This book is not simply alarmist, but suffused with fascination with both humanity and all of the rest of the world it is killing off. A slowly building (in human terms) but incredibly rapid (in planet terms) crisis is described. It is not looking good, really. Not at all.

Charvi says

I don't read a lot of nonfiction books but I really have been trying to get into some more. This book was enjoyable in the sense that I wasn't overwhelmed by all the science that Leaky and his coauthor explained. They tended to focus more on overall impacts, and everything was explained in a way that someone even with minimal knowledge about the subject could understand.

I think what I liked most about this book was the positive attitude about the future of the Earth. Most books on this topic that I have attempted to read have been very "We're all going to die and we can't do anything about it and Humans suck and Humans aren't cool" while this book was more "Hey, we have created some problems and it's important to acknowledge it and we can fix it!"

Lynley says

Forget horror fiction, try reading this book if you're feeling a bit too chipper lately.

Nick Burrows says

I read this book as my choice from the library's "Blind Date With a Book" display. I would never have chosen this book and honestly felt betrayed that a nonfiction book written by a paleoarcheologist was wrapped in pink paper. But the book was more interesting than I thought it would be and gave me food for thought about the role humans play in global ecology. I would be interested to find out if trends have changed in the past 20 years, but I suspect they haven't.

Robin says

This book should be read by more people. Leakey got into the Human as a part of nature debate in the context of environmentalism early. Well written, compassionate, and laced with common sense.

Joseph says

What an eye-opener! This is not just a boring book on evolutionary ecology; it is a wake-up call to ecologists, conservationists, anti-alarmist critics, intellectuals, and last but not least, everyday people who remain unconcerned about the ecotastrophe that is happening right now and will continue well into the future.

Leakey frames the debate for what he refers to as the intellectual revolution of our time: the acceptance that our ideas about evolution and our place in the world are steeped in human bias in ways never before so apparent. The resulting need for us to embrace a view of life on Earth that scraps outmoded notions of human superiority in favor of the diversity we are a part of is dire. He puts our species in historical perspective, that is, on an evolutionary and not human time scale. Compared to the five major extinctions we know about from the fossil record, the havoc wreaked on today's biosphere is tantamount to a sixth major extinction. This time, it's not an asteroid, but rather a direct result of our species' actions and ignorance. Is it possible to reverse the current biological holocaust we **are** causing, or will we continue our short-sightedness and destroy the very diverse world we and every other unique species depend upon? More people reading books like this is a step in the right direction.

"Our self-awareness impresses itself on us so cogently, as individuals and as a species, that we cannot imagine ourselves out of existence, even though for hundreds of millions of years humans played no part in the flow of life on the planet. When Teilhard de Chardin wrote, "The phenomenon of Man was essentially foreordained from the beginning," he was speaking from the depth of individual experience, which we all share, as much as from religious philosophy. Our inability to imagine a world without *Homo sapiens* has a profound impact on our view of ourselves; it becomes seductively easy to imagine that our evolution was inevitable. And inevitability gives meaning to life, because there is a deep security in believing that the way things are is the way they were meant to be."

"Eighty-five percent of recorded species live in the terrestrial realm, and the majority of these, some 850,000, are arthropods (that is, insects, spiders, and crustaceans). Most of the arthropod species are insects, and almost half of these are beetles, a fact that is said to have inspired a famous epigram from the British biologist J.B.S. Haldane. On being asked, one day, by some clerical gentlemen what his study of the natural world had revealed to him about God, Haldane is said to have replied that it indicated that He had "an inordinate fondness of beetles."

Bill Yancey says

Written in layman's terms, easy to understand explanations of both evolution and extinctions, with emphasis on the likely ongoing extinction caused by *homosapiens sapiens* by destruction of habitat and climate change. Well worth reading.

Mirrani says

Surprisingly entertaining book that discusses the evolution of the world itself, breaking it down by areas and locations, proving that species have a natural tendency to come and go and suggesting that it isn't only the humans who are responsible. That doesn't mean we can simply do what we want though, there is plenty of

evidence inside these pages that proves that although nature also destroys habitats and makes drastic changes in order to continue life in all its various forms, so do we. And we are much more unbalanced about doing it.

Far from being a lecture on how to change our lives in order to save everything, this book sees the balance needed in keeping knowledge expanding and understanding what must be done to preserve both a species and the natural way of maintaining life around us. After reading this book I found myself highly reminded about the things we as humans do to the world around us, but I saw it in a slightly different light. Very interesting read that has brought on several discussions among friends.
