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Review of "The Future of Life," by Edward O. Wilson

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Edward O. Wilson, *The Future of Life* (Random House 2002). ISBN 0679450785 [256 pp. \$22.00. Hardbound, 1540 Broadway, New York, NY 10036].

It is refreshing to read an environmental diatribe where the writer has both the authority of a world expert and a willingness to compromise to pursue realistic solutions. Wilson is a Harvard biology professor, two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, and a director of the Nature Conservancy. In *The Future of Life*, he presents a succinct evaluation of the great ecological issues of our day, focusing on the rapid pace of species extinctions, and on the promise of finding a balance between conservation and human activity that will bring the extinctions to a halt.

The Future of Life begins with a fascinating overview of life itself, its awesome diversity, its adaptation to the most extreme environments on Earth, and even the possibility of life on Mars, Europa, Callisto, and elsewhere in the Universe. From this perspective of life in the grandest scheme, Wilson turns to the current pace of extinctions and resource depletion due to human activity. Wilson then frames a debate between an environmentalist and a hypothetical opponent who is more concerned with economic growth than the environment. This hypothetical opponent is a representative of the “juggernaut of technology-based capitalism” and is portrayed as reading *The Economist*.¹

From that debate, Wilson tries to find a middle ground. He recognizes that economic and technological growth cannot be reversed and, instead, are the best hope to continue relieving poverty and disease throughout the world. Instead he seeks out a way for “its direction [to] be changed by mandate of a generally shared long-term environmental ethic” to which everyone’s opinion can converge.² Wilson diplomatically points out that economists also recognize value in the natural environment, and conservationists enjoy driving to national parks in combustion-engine cars.

To further his tone of optimistic compromise, Wilson finds hope in the slowdown and projected stop in human population growth, in environmentally friendly legislation and treaties, and in conservation methods that also produce proven economical value, such as ecotourism and bioprospecting for medical products. Wilson even concedes that genetically modified foods, though requiring further study, may contribute to environmental conservation by making agriculture more productive. This would reduce

1. Edward O. Wilson, *The Future of Life* 156 (Random House 2002).

2. *Id.*

our environmental impact by allowing greater human nutrition to be produced from less cropland and by reducing use of chemical pesticides.

Wilson's conciliatory tone ends with his professed admiration for the World Trade Organization protestors in Seattle and Genoa. He also lapses a few times into the poorly reasoned hyperbole that sometimes erodes conservationists' credibility. For instance, at one point Wilson decries "...the United States, whose citizens are working at a furious pace to overpopulate and exhaust their own land and water from sea to shining sea."³ Yet, Wilson indicates elsewhere that population growth in the United States is now due only to immigration, and that the non-immigrant population of the United States has achieved zero growth.⁴

In another, more esoteric instance, Wilson suggests humans are the first species to alter the environment on a global scale: "*Homo sapiens* has become a geophysical force, the first species in the history of the planet to achieve that dubious distinction."⁵ This neglects earlier species, such as varieties of cyanobacteria, that have transformed the global environment by scrubbing out the main component of the original atmosphere, carbon dioxide, and replacing it with oxygen and nitrogen – which together constitute 99% of the Earth's modern atmosphere. We are not the first species to alter our environment.

On the other hand, Wilson's detailed account of different species that have recently gone extinct or are down to just a few individuals shows good reason to be disturbed. The current rate of extinctions is in the range of the greatest mass extinctions on record, including the K-T impact event that eliminated the dinosaurs and many other life forms 65 million years ago. Wilson outlines what he calls the bottleneck of the next century or so: the efforts, or lack thereof, of our generation will make an indefinitely large difference in the future biological heritage of the Earth. What we choose to do in the next century will determine whether a significant fraction of living species survive or perish.

The Future of Life is most valuable for presenting a comprehensive road map for environmental remedy. In perhaps the most compelling prescription, Wilson outlines the problem of perverse subsidies, whereby governments use taxpayer money to finance economically wasteful activity that also destroys the environment. An example of this is the massive subsidies Germany pays to its coal mines, theoretically to protect the miners' jobs, but also artificially sustaining coal-fired power plants that are not

3. *Id.* at 39.

4. *Id.*

5. *Id.* at 23.

6. *Id.* at 161.

only unprofitable in the free market, but are also the single greatest form of global environmental degradation. Wilson goes on to offer a summary of sources of value in biodiversity, some not yet realized, and recommends economically valuable drivers for ecological protection. He also identifies twenty-five “hotspot” ecosystems, as defined by Conservation International, that together cover only 1.4 percent of Earth’s land surface, but are “the last remaining homes of . . . 43.8 percent of all known species of vascular plants and 35.6 percent of the known mammals, birds, reptiles, and amphibians.”⁶ Concentrating conservation efforts on these hotspots will yield the greatest protection of biodiversity among competing conservation priorities.

Analyses such as these make it possible for policymakers and other actors to cooperate with conservationists in carrying out conservation efforts according to reasoned priorities, something that cannot be done where conservationists offer nothing more than an undistinguishing, blanket opposition to any development. *The Future of Life* provides an ideal, scientifically authoritative, well documented, and absorbing primer on the essential issues of environmental conservation, and a concise but vital guide for shaping environmental policy.

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