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The End of the Wild

Stephen Meyer

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Two weeks after this book was published Stephen Meyer died. As he said a few days before his death, “This will undoubtedly be the last article I ever publish and I’m happy about the message it carries.” Meyer’s message, however, is anything but happy. It is simple and it is sombre – the race to save the composition, structure and organisation of biodiversity as it exists today is over ... and we have lost.

This book is an exemplar of clear, structured polemical writing, a ten thousand word essay where each word serves a purpose, where each sentence communicates its meaning, and where each paragraph leads purposefully onto the next. Writing less is harder than writing more. Yet in just 97 quarto-sized pages Meyer offers a more powerful and convincing dissection of the human predicament in relation to biodiversity than most full length academic books.

Darwinian evolution through natural selection is over; the evolutionary process is now increasingly dominated by human selection. We are transforming nature “into a product of the human imagination – like a Disney cartoon”. This is what Meyer describes as the end, or the antithesis, of the wild. This echoes Bill McKibbin’s prophetic and haunting lament in 1990 for the end of nature, and the end of the wild may be seen as another in the series of ‘endings’ we humans have seemingly constructed: the end of history (Fukuyama), the end of science (Horgan), the end of poverty (Sachs) and the end of civilisation (Lovelock). We do truly seem to be living in the end times.

There is a double irony in the way Meyer juxtaposes natural and human selection as the guiding power of evolution. Darwin’s idea that species evolve through a process of natural selection was deeply influenced by his observation of the effects of ‘domestication’ or selective breeding of certain species; i.e., by human selection. And yet the era in which this idea was first articulated and assimilated into human thought – the 1860s – was the very era that Meyer argues began the inexorable human extirpation of the wild; i.e., “the growing dominance of human selection in evolution”. Natural selection was on the wane almost as soon as we discovered its potency in creating the diversity of observable life on Earth.

Meyer’s account takes us through the three generic species that now inhabit the Earth: the ascendancy of the *weedy* species, the marginalisation of the *relic* species, and the inevitable demise of the *ghostly* species. The extinction debt is now so large as to have condemned a majority of the world’s species to eventual distinction, or at least loss from the wild. His account then takes us through the five categories of intervention humans have devised to restrain the damage: prohibitory regulation, refuges and preserves, sustainable communities, engineered wildlands and genetic modification. And he explains why each one is doomed to failure “... these efforts cannot prevent the end of the wild.”

So what does Meyer’s honest and blunt analysis leave for us to do? Indeed, should we do anything at all? One coherent prescription is to let the new processes of human selection of ecosystems and species simply run their course. Operating

through benign neglect, human selection would allow the dominant weedy species to define the new wild. The wild is dead; long live the new wild. This prescription is abhorrent to Meyer, although he does not bottom out the reasons he gives. Simply saying “from a humanist standpoint the quality of life on Earth would plummet” hides too many presuppositions that would be better elaborated. From whose standpoint should we evaluate quality? Have we identified the essential or universal components of quality of life? If so, can these not change over time? Perhaps there are more creative ways of thinking about the human project, even if they require a suspiciously large dose of optimism. Humans find value and satisfaction in most of the things we have ‘engineered’, our artefacts; could we not also find value in an engineered or virtual wild, a synthetic Eden?

Meyer’s alternative prescription doesn’t sound much more appealing. Depressingly it implies further ecosystem selection and managerial intervention by humans. It certainly does not take us back to the wild as defined in the US Wilderness Act of 1964, “... an area where the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man, where man himself is a visitor who does not remain”. Meyer argues for natural-area trusts (or NATs), huge swathes of protected landscape and seascape selected to enable ecosystem processes to function holistically and dynamically. He argues for intensive management within these NATs aimed, ironically, to emulate the processes of natural selection through human enabling. He argues for stronger enforcement of existing prohibitive policies and for a redirection of research funding away from space exploration and military wizardry and towards a deeper inventory and understanding of the world’s ‘web of life’ – or what Meyer describes as fast becoming ‘a strand of life’.

All this makes good managerial sense, and represents a more thorough-going commitment to the types of rationalistic interventions towards conservation that we have developed in the last 50 years. Yet prefacing all of these arguments is Meyer’s identification of something more fundamental that needs redress. It is something to do with us, something to do with you and me. Meyer is not alone among commentators in identifying that the problem with humanity is the human condition, the enemy within – as he baldly states, “what must change is us”. He suggests that we have recognised the instrumental relationship we have with the wild, we are beginning to recognise the genetic linkages, but we have failed to see the moral linkages.

The End of the Wild is a powerful, lucid and challenging tract. It can be read in not much more than 40 minutes and it should be compulsory reading for all citizens. Meyer is pessimistic about the chances of restoration or even conservation. Just as we have inadvertently manufactured an artificial climate for ourselves, we have become the masters of ecosystem and species selection, usurping the role of nature revealed by Darwin 150 years ago. As with many other things in our society, wild has become a relative term. Maybe we are happy with this, or maybe at least we are not that unhappy. But Meyer’s final call to us from, now, beyond the grave is ... stop! Remember that we are moral beings, with a deeply held sense of right and wrong. Our efforts to protect our companion species on this Earth should, “... like the Ten Commandments, remind us who we could be.”

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