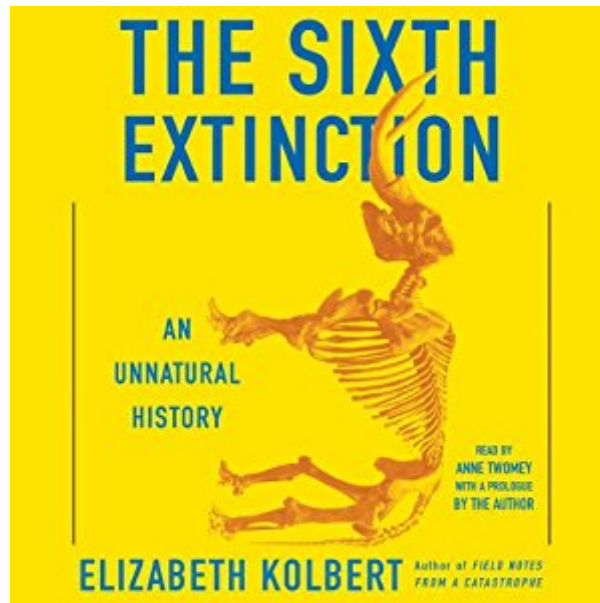


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The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History



Synopsis

A major audiobook about the future of the world, blending intellectual and natural history and field reporting into a powerful account of the mass extinction unfolding before our eyes. Over the last half a billion years, there have been five mass extinctions, when the diversity of life on Earth suddenly and dramatically contracted. Scientists around the world are currently monitoring the sixth extinction, predicted to be the most devastating extinction event since the asteroid impact that wiped out the dinosaurs. This time around, the cataclysm is us. In *The Sixth Extinction*, two-time winner of the National Magazine Award and *New Yorker* writer Elizabeth Kolbert draws on the work of scores of researchers in half a dozen disciplines, accompanying many of them into the field: geologists who study deep ocean cores, botanists who follow the tree line as it climbs up the Andes, marine biologists who dive off the Great Barrier Reef. She introduces us to a dozen species, some already gone, others facing extinction, including the Panamanian golden frog, staghorn coral, the great auk, and the Sumatran rhino. Through these stories, Kolbert provides a moving account of the disappearances occurring all around us and traces the evolution of extinction as concept, from its first articulation by Georges Cuvier in revolutionary Paris up through the present day. The sixth extinction is likely to be mankind's most lasting legacy; as Kolbert observes, it compels us to rethink the fundamental question of what it means to be human.

Book Information

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Nature & Ecology > Natural History

Customer Reviews

Ah, the good old days: remember cars that got maybe 13 miles per gallon, sci-fi movies about alien

things crashing into Earth to be defeated by military know-how, big game hunting safaris with triumphant pictures, whale steaks on the new food menu, cute bleached coral and lacquered fish for home decoration, traveling abroad was exotic - almost a once-in-a-lifetime experience! Sure you do. And if you're still a little wistful for those times, Elizabeth Kolbert's 2014 book, "The Sixth Extinction," is not going to be very satisfying. It may sound like a new cinema offering but it is far, far from it. "The Sixth Extinction" is a series of personally crafted portraits of life in its many different forms in flux and, in some cases, ceasing to exist - even as we read the author's words. Drawing on her writing experience with "The New Yorker" Magazine, Kolbert blends knowledge, anecdote and eyewitness details to create a sense of authenticity so the reader feels like he or she is part of the experience. Those seeking more rigorous analysis and exposition should try Scientific American's collections such as the 2014 "Storm Warnings: Climate Change and Extreme Weather" (see my November 3, 2014 "Whistling in a Warm Wind" review - here's the link: https://www.com/review/R3NXXCNADBUTUI/ref=cm_cr_rdp_perm). Through thirteen chapters the author presents pictures of various species in crisis, the probable reasons for their present state of emergency and the efforts undertaken to aid and preserve them. Each chapter has a particular species focal point such as golden tree frogs in Panama, the American mastodon, graptolites in Scotland, coral colonies around Australia's Great Barrier Reef, declining biodiversity in the , Sumatran rhinos in U.S. zoos and new insights about relationship between Homo Neanderthalensis and Homo Sapiens in Germany. Interspersed in the initial chapters is the history of the development of various scientific approaches to understanding fossil remains, historical epochs, eras and periods, and the development of evolutionary theory, whether by catastrophe or gradual change (or "long periods of boredom interrupted occasionally by panic"). While still anecdotal, the latter chapters weave some interesting fact-based information, for example:- Earth has an estimated 50 million habitable acres, of which 27 million have been converted by people for multiple uses such as cities, housing, and pastureland. The remaining 23 million acres are roughly 60% for forests in which various species live and the remaining 40% are mountains, deserts, tundra, etc.- The various species on Earth are composed of two to seven million for insects, ten thousand for birds and five thousand for mammals, including people.- Amphibians are the most endangered group followed by reef corals, fresh water mollusks, sharks and rays, mammals and birds. Along the way, other startling observations emerge: biodiversity is declining not only due to the "old causes" such as hunted to extinction for various reasons but also new ones such as global warming impact on life-sustaining ranges, the loss of habitat space, the inability to regenerate a species due to slower reproduction rate and the rapid vulnerability to new diseases (fungal, bacterial or viral). All of these

causes are now achieving a dark and unexpected synergy. Kolbert is presenting the current conditions as potential for a Sixth Major Extinction of the planet's species. In the prior roughly 500 million years there have been upwards of 25 periods of species extinction, of which five are considered to have been major ones due to breadth and probably rate of surrounding change. Nearly all of these were due to factors beyond the control of the inhabitants at the time: changes in chemical balances, glaciations and global warming due to Earth orbit wobbles, volcanic eruptions and asteroid impact leading to global cooling that killed off many of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. What makes the concern for the next big extinction is that it may be triggered by us - very, very rapidly. At a speed of change far beyond anything that has happened before - be it global warming by burning millions of years of fossil fuels, by eliminating living space on land or in sea for other species, or by sheer carelessness. Shall we support initiatives for mitigating factors that we can affect such as global warming? Or shall we fiddle while home burns?

Elizabeth Kolbert gives us the gift of new awareness with this book. She combines a sense of adventure, thorough research, personal courage, acute observation and good story telling to bring us the story of extinction as we know it today. She speaks to us of worlds gone by along with their plants and animals. She tells us of the amazing (to us now) myths of what people made out of fossils before we knew animals we never dreamed of roamed the earth long before we did. And she brings us to far away exotic places as well as easily accessed practically in your back yard sources of remnants of life gone by. She introduces us to the people, the incredible scientists and their students, who brave the elements and tolerate the tedium in gathering bits and pieces that are many millions of years old as well as explore vast caves and jungles to observe extinction in action now. Her conclusions make abundant sense after you read her work. She makes you think. And she may make you reevaluate what you think now. She's inspired me to watch the documentary, "The Sixth Extinction." I recommend it. And I'm heading back to the Museum of Natural History to see what's available to us now. I haven't been for many years. Somehow, when I first learned about the really ancient past I took in the information as if it were as permanent as the rocks and fossils described. New bits of information got tagged onto the store of knowledge as it was packed in my brain. But science keeps exploring, delving, discovering. We keep learning. And as we learn we gain a new and sometimes quite different perspective on what we thought we knew before. Kolbert gives us this experience in her marvelous book. I highly recommend it. Joanna Poppink, MFT Los Angeles eating disorder recovery psychotherapist author of *Healing Your Hungry Heart: recovering from your eating disorder*

Six extinction is a new concept that this book brought to my attention. While knowledgeable regarding global warming I had little understanding of extinctions that have already taken place. I was aware of bats in the US in decline, but not aware that a disease has totally wiped them out across the U.S. Likewise I was aware of problems with some frogs becoming extinct, but not aware that frogs have already become extinct worldwide. Nor did I know some of the science of how coral reefs are impacted. Kolbert does a very good job reviewing previous extinctions, explaining the science behind current extinctions, and the potential for a sixth extinction due to human activity. Kolbert's writing style for *The Sixth Extinction* is personal interactions and discussions with researchers in locations throughout the world. Her approach is engaging, highly personalized, and detailed while keeping the reader focused on the big picture. I found *The Sixth Extinction* to be a quick, easy read, and left me wanting to know more.

If you didn't realize it before, you certainly will after reading this book - no matter what humans do, intentionally or not, we accelerate the demise of all types of species from the smallest to the largest. Moreover, we have done so ever since our Neanderthal ancestors trod the earth, and then in the supreme bit of irony, modern humans did it to the Neanderthals. The examination of select species and the personal stories of people studying them makes for an interesting read. I feel the book ended rather abruptly and could have included a more thorough examination of where we can (or should) go from here. As it is, the book slapped me into ecological consciousness but then didn't show me what I needed to do now that I am awake.

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