


On Extinction: How We Became Estranged from Nature

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The destruction of nature as a consequence of modern human lifestyles, industries and agriculture is leading to the Earth's sixth great extinction of species. Current estimates suggest that the rate of extinction is now thousands of times that counted in the fossil record before the emergence of modern man. At the same time, human societies themselves are in a cultural extinction crisis, with experts anticipating that of the world's nearly seven thousand languages as few as ten percent may survive into the next century. Melanie Challenger's extraordinary book is an exploration of how we might live to resist these extinctions and why such disappearances must be of concern to us. Adventurous, curious and passionate about her subject, Challenger takes us on a very personal journey as she tries to restore her own relationship with nature. The narrative unfolds through a series of landscapes haunted by extinction. From the ruined tin mines of Cornwall and the abandoned whaling stations of South Georgia to the Inuit camps of the Arctic and the white heart of Antarctica, she probes the critical relationship between human activities and environmental collapse. This is the first book to weave together the strands of cultural, biological and industrial extinctions into a meditation on the way we live beside nature in the modern world.

On Extinction: How We Became Estranged from Nature Details

Date : Published October 1st 2011 by Granta Books (Uk) (first published January 1st 2011)

ISBN : 9781847083616

Author : Melanie Challenger

Format : Paperback 339 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Environment, Nature, Science, History, Anthropology, Philosophy, Biology

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Sam says

I was really disappointed by this book. From the synopsis on the cover I was expecting to read about how, as a species, we have separated ourselves from nature, the repercussions of this on the natural world and how we can find our way back to living with nature rather than against. Instead I got to read about how modern civilisation has caused the 'extinction' of more traditional ways of life of local peoples the world over with only little nods to the damage we have done to the planet itself. Granted I expected some insight into how past civilisations managed a more coherent approach to the natural world and how this has been lost but I did not expect that to be the main focus of the book. I'm sure there are many readers that would find this interesting and on one level I did and if this had been described better within the synopsis I may have enjoyed the book more.

On a more positive note Challenger does have a fluid and poetic style of writing that brings the subject matter to life and those occasions where she did detail the impacts on the natural environment resulting from our actions were superb and obviously well researched. I did find the lack of illustration explanations a little irritating as I had to keep turning to the illustration list at the front of the book, which did interrupt the flow a little but this more of a personal thing and may not irritate other readers. Overall not a bad read with the biggest annoyance being the lack of cohesion between the book cover and synopsis and the actual content.

Tina Musich says

This book read like a graduate thesis mashed with a Victorian novel in a bad way. The author switches between describing her feelings and surroundings in detail to theoretical and scientific ideas she has learned about. I found it hard to follow and finish.

I also found the book to be repetitive. Roughly half is about the Arctic and Antarctic while the other half is about England. Some more variety in examples would have helped to move the book along. I did learn an awful lot about whale hunting, though.

There were some interesting ideas here but they were buried in wordy prose.

Fox says

Like others, this book was not entirely what I was expecting it to be.

Rather than a wholly philosophical look at modern people's estrangement from nature, this book takes both a wider and more narrow view at the destructiveness of humankind over time. Alternatively this book focuses upon the whaling industry and the mining industry, with brief stopovers for the general way the use of oil has impacted the environment and is changing the Inuit people's way of life. I say this view is narrow, for she focuses primarily by way of visiting various places and interviewing the people there; she digs deep into the histories of singular places and how they have been affected rather than focusing upon the whole. This book is deeper for it does delve into the past, and draws connections between lack of place and connection to

nature and rising suicide rates in some places.

This is a beautiful book, poetically written and with the true heart of a Romantic at the center. There is beauty to be found in ruins, and confusion to be found in nostalgia. Too often what we long for is a mixture between what we actually lived and what we imagined. Is that a bad thing? A central focus is the idea that perhaps our nostalgia could be used to better interact with the environment and world around us at large. Is there something in our nature that makes us destructive, or is it the motivations that need to change? Why do we lack an interest in the world around us?

Ultimately few resolutions are reached. Instead, there is simply a message and hope that we will better engage with our own locations and places in the world. Learn the land, learn the animals, and learn to live with it and in it in a different, and non-destructive and greedy way. Instead, take only what you need. Or at least that's what I got out of it.

I'd be curious to hear what others made of it all.

Martha Silano says

I found myself rushing home to get back to my Kindle to read more of this wonderful book that meanders through different parts of the world, including Cornwall, Antarctica, and Northern Canada. Challenger's voice is authoritative yet totally approachable. I felt like she was talking to me ... but then she had also done her research. Highly recommend to those who enjoy an even-handed approach to global warming and its consequences.

Christopher says

Wow. How could such a great potential topic come out so lame? Not a single actual rumination of species-wide extinction and the insignificance of humanity. More of a hippy travel writing book saved only from being tossed aside in frustration for the uniqueness of many of the locations which the chapters are written about. To really engage with such a topic seriously check out John N Gray or hell, Lovecraft's stories are better at dealing with these issues, albeit indirectly.

Jennifer says

If you are looking for charts, graphs, tables and a lot of data, this is not the book you want. Nonetheless, poet Melanie Challenger beautifully links her musings on missing wildlife and lost human ways of living. I liked the way she connected observations in ways that fall outside strictly scientific procedure. A thoughtful and worthwhile read.

Kathryn says

I thought this book was awesome I imagined it would be so much better but it was still good. Hard to review because I read to make myself have a better general knowledge of time passing through the technology and how things change and old ways become something that people just talk about. It was nice to consider that these things may not be passed down but we can certainly read about them in a book. A great read for an ageing environmentalist and someone who cares about the future.

Diogenes says

What a wonderful, morbidly beautiful work of memoiristic philosophy sprinkled thoroughly with history, earth sciences, etymology, poetics and literary leanings, psychology, and the nature of humanity at its most base levels. Challenger meanders through fen and tundra, gardens and graveyards in sought-after isolation, inhaling the incense of energized melancholy, utilizing a voice that reads like something diaphanous, but is laden with sea-deep thoughts, ruminating on ruination, an entrancing walkabout through layers of what the concept of *extinction* actually **means**, from crumbling castles to melting ice caps, of cultures and species vanished from the world, of languages lost and words forgotten, all threaded through with that time-worn mantra of "nothing is permanent except impermanence." *sigh*

There is a true beauty in ruins, desolation, or other aspects of "the lost past" that cuts deep into the psyche of many of us (tourism flourishes off it; Hollywood glorifies and perpetuates it), and this beauty does so on some serene level of intimacy, like goth kids hanging around tombstones, smoking dope and listening to old cassettes of The Cure, an Anne Rice paperback wedged into a cargo pocket, steel-toed boots clacking to the snare of "Fascination Street." "I began to see that the idea of loss was riveting to the imagination, like shrapnel lodging in the mind as a permanent ache." There are bones and potsherds beneath every footfall, ghosts in every shadow, ancient songs within every breeze, and like it or not, we're all decaying matter waiting to be.

Challenger, to me, is a new-wave transcendentalist, with British gravitas, armed with druidic wisdom, academic respect, simple awe, and humanistic empathy. Her writing style is soothing, taking the reader by the hand and leading us along her journey of discovery, as if sharing secret thoughts to a close friend. I would greatly enjoy a conversation over coffee with her, if ever the Fates allowed it.

Karen Douglass says

I liked the idea of this book but ultimately I could not get through it. The first half or so was very good, but the whaling stories went on too long and in too much detail. This is an unusual complaint for me, as I often complain of too little detail.

Felicity says

Beautifully written book, really draws your thoughts to the impact our behaviour has had on the natural world around us and what we find truly important in life.

Nicole says

It's a basic book, neither delving too deeply into the extinctions of plants and animals, nor the extinctions of cultures and languages. It's largely an exploration of a sense that it's time to start paying attention to nature and human beings, how the two intertwine and the consequences of forward progress without looking into existing relationships. I enjoyed the book. The author employs some nice prose and there were passages that brought up interesting points to consider. I'll admit, I was often left wanting more. But, overall, it was okay.

Rose says

If you've ever been frustrated by news about the breakneck pace at which wildlife habitats are being destroyed, you will want to read poet Melanie Challenger's *On Extinction*, a meditation on humanity's appetite for destruction. Challenger's book resonates nicely with W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz*; she devotes a paragraph to him as part of her discussion of Futurism and its unabashed delight in the "beauty" of war. As Challenger interacts with a variety of landscapes and travels to some remote locales, she asks questions about what it means to be human and what our relation to nature is or should be, questions that all of us need to be asking ourselves if wildlife is to survive. Particularly interesting is her discussion of the notion -- prominent in the 19th century -- that humans who are highly adapted to a particular landscape, i.e., "primitive" or indigenous people, are less likely to survive sudden and drastic changes to their environment. Challenger experiences a deep nostalgia for earlier times, when people quite naturally knew things like the names of wildflowers and birds, and existed in more harmony with the landscape. Perhaps the most challenging of all the accomplishments of this book is that she manages to end it on a hopeful note.

Wouter says

Not what I expected, but good. It is more reflective and poetic.

Mark Banaszak says

Not what I expected but very good. Not only about extinction, but also our nostalgia for things that have disappeared from the Earth. It is very poetic and very researched. I feel guilty now too, because like the author I do not yet have a favorite wildflower. I am thinking the monument plant (*Frasera speciosa*), which flowers only once in its lifespan of 20-80 years, often coordinated with other monument plants. Life's unnoticed miracles...

Danielle says

I didn't love this book at first. Actually, I didn't think I was going to make it through the first chapter. Maybe that's because I wasn't entirely sure what the premise was going to be. Anyway, the first chapter was really boring but I'm glad I continued to read.

Once I started to figure it out and get into the flow, all my doubts vanished. Not only is this book beautifully

written but the author has an amazing capability to take you from one thought to another and then through a tangent, all with seamless transitions. I felt like I was inside of her mind.
