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The eminent biologist reflects on his own response to nature and the aesthetic aspects of his exploration of natural systems in an intensely personal essay that examines the essential links between mankind and the rest of the living world.

Biophilia Details

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From Reader Review *Biophilia* for online ebook

Rift Vegan says

Nov 2013... I first read this book in 2011, but since I didn't leave any kind of comment here, I couldn't remember what it was about! ha. And now I remember why. Each chapter is a separate essay about random things. One is about science and art, another is about snakes, there are some ants of course, genes, why humans like savannas, the scientific beginnings of biogeography. Even tho the book is short, it's all over the place, and a couple sentence review seems inadequate. :)

Betsy says

Written for a wide audience, Wilson describes his provocative (and political) concept of biophilia through a series of anecdotes and stunning examples from the creatural world. What I love about biologists: they seldom forget that humans are creatures. Whether or not you agree wholeheartedly with Wilson's dedicated evolutionary stance, this exploration/reverie on the interconnection of all things living (an evolving category) has some really lovely moments.

Jenni says

If you like biological philosophy books, then this book is for you!

The first few chapters of this book were amazing to me. I've always thought that my interest and love of nature is inherent to my humanity, as this book focuses on convincing readers.

Towards the end of the book, it became apparent how dated some of the information is. Because science is always evolving, this couldn't be helped. Unfortunately, it made my attention wane.

The first chapters were so strong that I expected to be very impressed by the persuasive techniques of the author. My expectations were not met. I generally agreed with many of the authors points, but was disappointed that there wasn't more substance -- more philosophy.

Overall, I recommend reading the first few chapters. The rest can be skipped, unless you feel compelled.

Bioteo says

Biophilia è un saggio scritto dal grande Edward O. Wilson nel 1984 che contiene i semi del suo profondo pensiero circa la natura e la relazione che l'uomo deve mantenere con essa. L'autore con questo termine definisce "la tendenza innata a concentrare il proprio interesse sulla vita e sui processi". Nonostante l'intimo legame con la natura, che ha visto i natali della nostra specie, siamo sempre più propensi, a causa del nostro

sviluppo culturale e tecnologico, ad escluderla fino ad estraniarci completamente da essa. "Il mondo naturale è il rifugio dello spirito, remoto, statico, assai più ricco della stessa immaginazione umana, ma noi non possiamo vivere in questo paradiso senza la macchina, e la macchina lo fa a pezzi". Tuttavia "Ben pochi potrebbero resistere per un certo tempo senza subire una perdita notevole in un mondo formato esclusivamente da se stessi e dalle loro macchine" Wilson sprona tutti noi a ricercare il legame intimo che abbiamo con il mondo naturale e sottolinea come questa tendenza sia una caratteristica innata nella nostra specie, che va semplicemente stimolata. La prova di ciò viene fornita nel capitolo in cui l'autore sostiene come la nostra specie, come tutte le altre presenti nel nostro pianeta, ha la tendenza a ricercare il proprio habitat elettivo. Nel nostro caso si ha la tendenza a ricreare un ambiente simile a quello della savana. Chi ha la possibilità di scelta predilige esclusivamente lande aperte, in cui sorgano degli alberi sparsi, situate su qualche altura sovrastata da acqua; una descrizione che ricalca molto bene l'ambiente di savana che ha assistito all'evoluzione della specie Homo sapiens. L'autore termina il proprio saggio con una profonda riflessione sull'etica della conservazione, tema che svilupperà in alcuni suoi saggi pubblicati successivamente quali "Il futuro della vita" e "La diversità della vita". Il vero nucleo del problema è la nostra totale incapacità a percepire eventuali problemi che si possono manifestare a medio-lungo termine. La selezione naturale ha programmato gli individui in modo che pensino per lo più in un tempo fisiologico e non ecologico e/o evolutivo. Da qui nasce l'incapacità di comprendere la tragicità della costante perdita di diversità che avrà ripercussioni negative nei secoli a venire. Wilson sostiene che l'unico modo per portare l'etica della conservazione all'attenzione dell'opinione pubblica sta nel porre le fondamenta in un ragionamento che sia egoistico. La biodiversità che sta scomparendo custodisce un'infinità di risorse non ancora sfruttate che potrebbero aiutare l'umanità a superare future sfide per la propria sopravvivenza. "In questo libro ho sostenuto che noi siamo umani in buona parte in virtù del particolare modo con cui ci rapportiamo agli altri organismi; questi ultimi costituiscono la matrice in cui la mente umana ha avuto origine e in cui mantiene permanentemente le sue radici; essi offrono l'occasione l'occasione e la libertà a cui gli esseri umani aspirano in modo innato" "La verità è che non abbiamo mai conquistato il mondo, che mai lo abbiamo compreso: crediamo, soltanto, di averne il controllo"

Matt Vickers says

A series of personal essays from one of America's foremost entomologists and naturalists. The book is now twenty years old and a contemporary reading reveals a great deal of prescience: things that Wilson was regarding as urgent and important in the 80s (saving rain forests, reducing greenhouse gas emissions) are only now becoming culturally fashionable. It's just a shame it took so long. He also describes some fascinating imaginative tools for comprehending the vast range and mass of our planet's life.

Erica says

I really do love Wilson. This book is a toned down way to gain perspective on the environment and the changes we as a species need to make in order to survive. Wilson doesn't protest outright but merely gives you the information you need to make the decision yourself. Wilson also touches on the subject of alien life and space exploration, possibly not as optimistically as one might hope but realistically. I think everyone should read this book.

Ted says

*I will be so bold as to define **biophilia** as the innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes.*
from the Prologue

E.O. Wilson, September 2009 (Wiki, Acghost)

Edward Osborne Wilson (born June 10, 1929) is an American biologist, researcher (sociobiology, biodiversity, island biogeography), theorist (consilience, biophilia), naturalist (conservationist) and author. (Wiki)

When I started reading *Biophilia* I was wary of the possibility that it might be dated. He addresses the question of species extinction and loss of biodiversity throughout the book, and though he expresses vast concern about both, Wilson is also (here and there) optimistic. *What would he think now, thirty years on?* the reader may wonder, as I did.

But fortunately that question can be answered (though you won't find the answer here), because Wilson has been writing throughout that period, and as the situation has become more dire, his views and hopes have evolved. So, to digress briefly, his best books by decade (according to the reviewer, who has only read one of them)

Pre-1990s: *Biophilia*

1990s: *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* *The Diversity of Life* *Naturalist*

2000s: *The Future of Life*

2010s: *The Meaning of Human Existence* *The Social Conquest of Earth* *A Window on Eternity* *Letters to a Young Scientist*

Biophilia is not simply a book about the life sciences. It is a memoir, a statement of philosophical and ethical positions, sprinkled with themes from years of field observations.

Mostly it is a book with an overarching idea, expressed in Wilson's concept of "biophilia" as that *innate tendency to focus on life and lifelike processes* - a tendency, he doesn't bother saying, which he ascribes to the human animal. Going a little further in his introduction, he says that the case he will make is that "to explore and affiliate with life is a deep and complicated process of mental development ... our existence depends on this propensity, our spirit is woven from it, hope rises on its currents ... to the degree that we come to understand other organisms, we will place a greater value on them, and on ourselves." (view spoiler)

In the first few chapters Wilson veers off on other paths. In **The Superorganism** he uses his world famous knowledge of the field of myrmecology (the study of ants) to relate many of the astounding details of the workings of leafcutter ants, emphasizing the idea that both individually (if that even makes sense for these creatures) and collectively, the life cycle of a colony is like nothing so much as the workings of a chemical machine. Another chapter tells of the male Emperor of Germany bird of paradise, and its elaborate courtship ritual. Over the last few pages Wilson presents a small essay on the way in which science can focus in on the

details of all the microscopic events which culminate in the courting dance; and then backs off from this description to explain how this analytic part of the science can be followed by a synthetic step which will return to the beauty of the image we perceive:

The excitement of the scientist's search for the true material nature of the species recedes, to be replaced in part by the more enduring responses of the hunter and poet ... With each new phase of synthesis to emerge from biological inquiry, the humanities will expand their reach and capability. In symmetric fashion, with each redirection of the humanities, science will add dimensions to human biology.

This leads directly into **The Poetic Species**, a lengthy narrative which includes reflections about Carl Sagan, Einstein, Max Plank; the importance of elegance and metaphor in the scientific enterprise; thoughts and ideas of T.S. Eliot, the Mexican poet Octavio Paz, Albert Camus, as they apply to science; and much more, having to do with "the common, human origin of science and art."

He reconstructs a fascinating description of the give and take that went on between him and the mathematician/ecologist Robert MacArthur over a period of time in the early 1960s in which they were gradually and jointly coming up with the founding ideas of the field of *insular biogeography*.

Finally, by adding more strands from the Irish poet Thomas Kinsella, the philosopher Richard Rorty, the astounding Indian mathematician and autodidact Srinivasa Ramanujan, the Belgian psychologist Gerda Smets, and a reference to Joseph Stella's "Tree of My Life" (below), Wilson makes his way to

The fiery circle of disciplines will be closed [completed] if science looks at the inward journey of the artist's mind, making art and culture objects of study in the biological mold, and if the artist and critic are informed of the workings of the mind and the natural world as illuminated by the scientific method. In principle at least, nothing can be denied to the humanities, nothing to science.

In the final three chapters Wilson begins to turn back toward a deeper examination of biophilia.

In **The Serpent**, he admits that, regarding this innate urge, "evidence for it is not strong in a formal scientific sense ... nevertheless so clearly evinced in daily life as to deserve serious attention ... It unfolds in the predictable fantasies and responses of individuals from early childhood onward. It cascades into repetitive patterns of culture across most or all societies, a consistency often noted in the literature of anthropology. These processes appear to be part of the programs of the brain. They are marked by the quickness and decisiveness with which we learn particular things about certain types of plants and animals. They are too consistent to be dismissed as the result of purely historical events working on a mental blank slate. ...

Perhaps the most bizarre of the biophilic traits is awe and veneration of the serpent”. And at the end of this chapter, a dense page, too much to quote, linking culture, the mind, consciousness, the biases “built into the sensory apparatus and brain by particularities in cellular architecture.”

Next, **The Right Place**. Animals have a built in (genetic) ability to seek out the environment that maximizes their chances to survive (example as minute as colon bacteria). The connection of this to the “preferred habitat of human beings ... With aesthetics we return to the central issue of biophilia ... and inquire about the prevalent direction of this vector in cultural evolution, in other words the ideal toward which human beings unconsciously strive.” And after examining humankind’s original life on the savannas of Africa, the question, “is the *mind* also predisposed to life on the savanna, such that beauty in some fashion can be said to be in the genes of the beholder?” He explores the work of three scientists who “have independently suggested that this is the case”: Gordon Orians, Yi-Fu Tuan and Rene Dubos; and concludes these pages, “Arcturian zoologists visiting this planet could make no sense of our morality and art until they reconstructed our genetic history – nor can we.”

Finally, **The Conservation Ethic** brings Wilson’s argument to a close, by turning the analysis into a search for an ethical grounding. “The future of the conservation movement depends on an advance in moral reasoning. Its maturation is linked to that of biology and a new hybrid field, bioethics.” (view spoiler)

Wilson concludes, and wraps up his case for biophilia and a conservation ethic, by writing

Natural philosophy has brought into clear relief the following paradox of human existence. The drive toward perpetual expansion – or personal freedom – is basic to the human spirit. But to sustain it we need the most delicate, knowing stewardship of the living world that can be devised. Expansion and stewardship may appear at first to be conflicting goals, but they are not. The depth of the conservation ethic will be measured by the extent to which each of the two approaches to nature is used to reshape and reinforce the other. The paradox can be resolved by changing its premises into forms more suited to ultimate survival, by which I mean protection of the human spirit.

Numerous times during my read I thought of two other authors I’ve read in recent years: Annie Dillard and Jacob Bronowski. Dillard because many of Wilson’s descriptions of the way in which a naturalist does field work were echoes of Dillard’s descriptions of how she observed nature in *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*; and Bronowski (*Science and Human Values*) because I sensed an agreement between them of the importance, the *very deep, fundamental importance*, of science for the human species – not simply as a way of knowing reality, but as a foundation upon which to build a description of what it is to be human.

Emily Crow says

A quiet but thoughtful book, making the case that humans, having evolved in the midst of a natural realm replete with species diversity, need that environment for our basic well-being. I was already familiar with the

premise, as it has been repeated in so many other books by now, but I am glad I finally read this one. There are many good nuggets of insight and thoughts to ponder here.

Barrett Doherty says

E.O. Wilson, one of the preeminent naturalists of our time, proposed the idea of biophilia in this landmark book in 1984. Wilson defines biophilia "as the urge to associate with other forms of life." In the last 30 years, the idea of Biophilia has become common place in design and other creative fields, approaching the level of a meme. The book is a collection of short essays reflecting on his experiences and observations over his long and distinguished career studying social insects, particularly ants. I found "The Right Place" essay to be particularly compelling.

Wilson successfully argues in "The Right Place" that humanity's roots and biological connection with our origins in the savannas of Africa and elsewhere is strongly reflected in our sense of parks and the most desirable places to live. The savanna offers wide open space with good visibility in all directions and isolated clumps of trees for shelter from the sun. Our ancestors chose the savanna over the adjoining forest and desert to live. High ground offers a particular advantage on the savannas due to its prominence for both hunting and defense. And of course, water is also a very desirable resource. Parks, our idealized sense of nature, strongly reflect these principles of open space punctuated with stands of trees with elevations and water. Wilson also notes that the wealthy, those of us least encumbered by economic restraints, frequently choose to live in areas that are on high ground with an exceptional view and often times overlooking bodies of water. This is all in response to our biological coding of our deep native habitat.

The essays "The Superorganism" about leaf cutter ants in the Amazon and their physical and social behaviors is also noteworthy as is the chapter "The Serpent" which examines mankind's and our close cousins powerful and fraught relationship with snakes.

Biophilia, is a compelling book about our natural human relationship to the world that surrounds us. Wilson is a keen humanist and highly observant scientist who illuminates some of our deeper connections with the natural world and ourselves.

Joel says

A fun book that is easy for me to identify with. Wilson sees mankind as blight on nature. Although I would certainly hesitate to submit to this borderline deep ecology philosophy, it is important to remember that we do not always need to "conquer nature" and that nothing is more pleasant than a wonderful day spent immersed in the natural world.

Melissa says

This skinny little book is a thought-provoking exercise in seeing the world in different ways. It is beautifully written, scientifically engaging, and politically inspiring. Wilson's glimpse into the hidden world of ants and disappearing mosses should give us all pause. Extinction could be significantly slowed by humans who have until now instead tended to act as though we exist outside of nature rather than within it. He reminds us all

that we are very much a part of the natural world and could have a more positive impact on the planet. His stricter sociobiological side aside, his work is very helpful for understanding the animal in us we prefer to ignore.

Brittany says

Do you suppose, if I admit that I find it a bit difficult to hold my attention to an E.O. Wilson book for long periods of time, that they will take away my science writing license?

I sure hope not, because I'm about to do just that.

This is not, however, I think Wilson's fault. Wilson is a god, a Titan, among science communications and general scientists, and I adore him as a human being and a leader. I've heard him speak, and it was wonderful. I think, for me, his books suffer from being almost too true. So much of *Biophilia* is so fundamental to my life and belief system that it's a little difficult to read. It'd be like if someone tried to get you to read a treatise on why recycling or composting is a good idea. You support them, clearly, but reading the arguments you've heard (and given!) gets old.

Wilson is a very gifted writer and communicator, and much of his text is eminently quotable, but . . . well, perhaps that is the trouble. It *is* very quotable, and at some point you sacrifice the flow of the narrative to it.

These are meant to be essays, though, so perhaps the flow isn't as important as the quotability at all. Perhaps these are meant to be more savored than read, meditations and poems rather than stories. After all, no one complains that the "Battle Hymn of the Republic" or the "Star-Spangled Banner" aren't sufficiently easy to sing.

In fact, perhaps it's churlish of me to complain. Maybe I'm not Wilson's target audience at all. I've already been converted. I believe with all my heart and soul and body and existence that humans are drawn to, and part of, the natural world, and that we would shrivel without it. I support superorganisms, and evolution at the group level, and altruism.

With all that said, this is a tremendously important book, and a colossally important idea. It's very important to have read, even if you don't luxuriate in the reading of it. And perhaps I am too jaded to appreciate the work properly.

Dave Angelini says

This is a book about an important idea. So before giving that away, I want to add a disclaimer. I am not trained as a philosopher or historian of science, but I am an academic biologist and a "concerned citizen" when it comes to ideas. My impression looking back at the 20th century is that it was characterized by the use of science as a justification to divorce humanity from the natural world. Wilson argues in *Biophilia* that this is a misappropriation of science, particularly biology. He argues that humanity's future just as its origins must be rooted in a co-existence with nature. This is the intellectual idea, but beyond this he argues passionately that the happiness and psychological well-being of each of us is tied to our relationship with nature. This seems to me to be a very important idea for everyone to consider seriously and feel deeply.

Louisa says

The truth is that we never conquered the world, never understood it; we only think we have control. We do not even know why we respond a certain way to other organisms, and need them in diverse ways, so deeply. The prevailing myths concerning our predatory actions toward each other and the environment are obsolete, unreliable, and destructive. The more the mind is fathomed in its own right, as an organ of survival, the greater will be the reverence for life for purely rational reasons.

In *Biophilia*, E.O. Wilson takes us on a tour through the jungles of Surinam, Brazil, and New Guinea, some of the last remaining wildernesses of this world, and argues that we human beings have an instinctive bond with other living systems, which eventually will lead us to protect rather than destroy all living things and the environment in which we live. I can only hope, with all my heart, that this is true.

Stefanie says

When I first read *Biophilia* in 2007, it affected me deeply. Since then I have referred to it often as my favorite book. Six years later, it still surprises and delights me. Is it still my number one favorite book? I suppose not anymore, but it is one of many favorites, one that I recommend to everyone with the hopes that it will serve as a source of inspiration and hope does for me.
