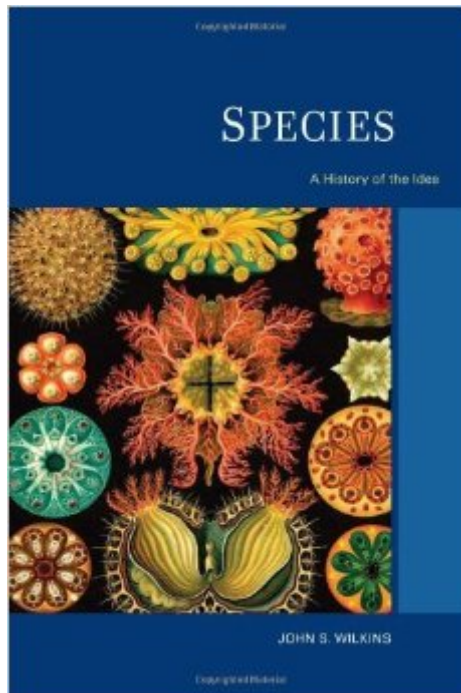


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Species: A History Of The Idea (Species And Systematics)



Synopsis

The complex idea of "species" has evolved over time, yet its meaning is far from resolved. This comprehensive work takes a fresh look at an idea central to the field of biology by tracing its history from antiquity to today. John S. Wilkins explores the essentialist view, a staple of logic from Plato and Aristotle through the Middle Ages to fairly recent times, and considers the idea of species in natural history—a concept often connected to reproduction. Tracing "generative conceptions" of species back through Darwin to Epicurus, Wilkins provides a new perspective on the relationship between philosophical and biological approaches to this concept. He also reviews the array of current definitions. Species is a benchmark exploration and clarification of a concept fundamental to the past, present, and future of the natural sciences.

Book Information

File Size: 2954 KB

Print Length: 320 pages

Publisher: University of California Press; 1 edition (September 8, 2009)

Publication Date: October 1, 2009

Sold by: Digital Services LLC

Language: English

ASIN: B002WB0YW4

Text-to-Speech: Enabled

X-Ray: Not Enabled

Word Wise: Not Enabled

Lending: Enabled

Enhanced Typesetting: Not Enabled

Best Sellers Rank: #1,302,726 Paid in Kindle Store (See Top 100 Paid in Kindle Store) #109

in Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Taxonomic Classification #1265 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction > Science > Evolution #2269 in Kindle Store > Kindle eBooks > Nonfiction > Science > History & Philosophy

Customer Reviews

I'm not a biologist or a philosopher but I found this book extremely interesting and it helped me with a couple of questions that I have been thinking about. Not by answering them, of course, but by bringing up new questions. I wanted some clues to the question of whether the red wolf of North America is a species or simply a hybrid between the coyote and the gray wolf. Wilkins didn't

address this question directly, as who would expect him to. However, he did mention that a species could arise through hybridization, or at least it could under some definitions of species. And I wanted to know if grizzly bear is the name of a sub-species of brown bear or simply a descriptive term for those brown bears who live in the uplands of the new world. Wilkins didn't address this question directly but it was clear to me after reading his book that grizzly bear cannot be the name of a sub-species unless they all derive from one population of coastal/lowland brown bears. If several populations of lowland brown bears each gave rise to a population of upland bears in the nearest high country, as I think may be true, then they are not a subspecies. In general, Wilkins discussed the history of the term species, beginning with the ancients who used the term for varieties of mineral as well as life forms, up to the present. He was willing to take on authority figures in the field. He seems to believe that species are real, in that one can observe them, and that the concept is useful, although not rock-solid. He didn't waste a great deal of time on trivial matters of human origins. And his use of the language was fine, although he is an Australian.

If you are looking for a fast and easy reading book that concludes with a contemporary definition of the term "species," *Species: A History of the Idea* is not the book for you. If you are looking for a detailed history of all the major and minor players with their contributions in the search for essence of the term "species," *Species: A History of the Idea* is definitely the book for you. The following quote from the Preface is illustrative of the overall style of the book: "In summary, then, we have three claims that this book is intended to demonstrate: the logical and natural species are distinct ideas that largely share only a term; there was a single species 'concept' from antiquity to the arrival of genetics, the generative conception; and types are neither the same as essences nor something that changes much with Darwin." While the reading is difficult, the material is an indispensable resource in the forensic search for the historical essence of the term "species." Richard William Nelson
Darwin, Then and Now: The Most Amazing Story in the History of Science

Wilkins takes us through a time journey from the age of the early Greek philosophers to the current era of evolutionary biology, dissecting the idea of species (and genus). This book is a must-read for those who aspire to competence in biological systematics. We are reminded of the pervasive notion of the Scala Naturae and its impact on Linnean, Lamarckian, and even contemporary thinking. This is contrasted with the unique insights of Darwin, who, according to the author, created the modern species concept while at the same time giving the impression of denying the existence of species as a special taxonomic category. The views of Dobzhansky, Mayr, and Hennig are examined in a new

light. My only reason for not giving 5 stars is the occasional bad sentence. The book would have greatly benefited from a close reading by a style editor.

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