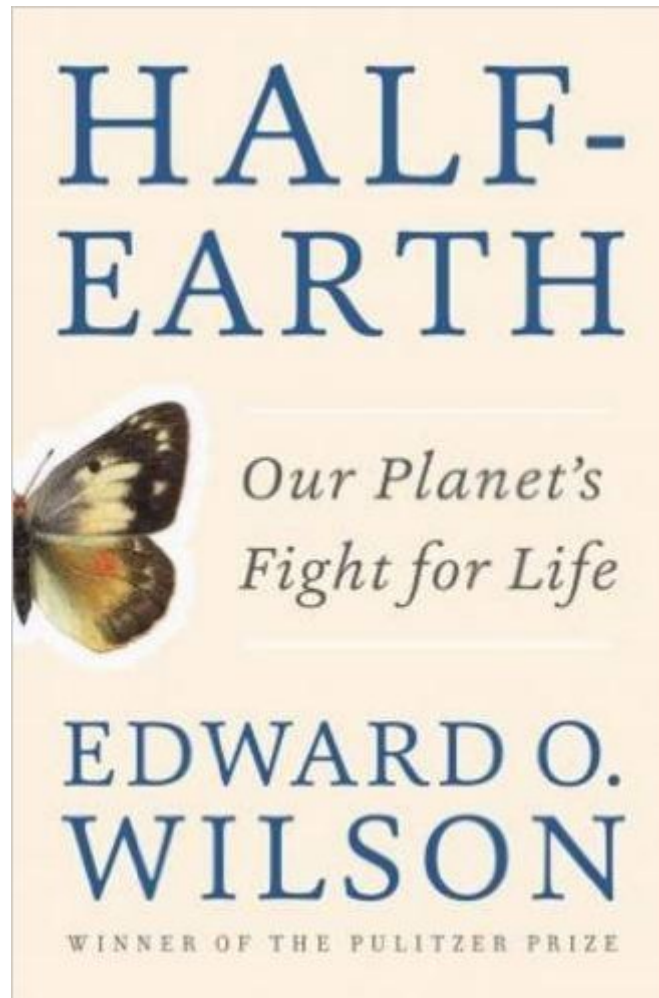


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Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight For Life



Synopsis

Half-Earth proposes an achievable plan to save our imperiled biosphere: devote half the surface of the Earth to nature. In order to stave off the mass extinction of species, including our own, we must move swiftly to preserve the biodiversity of our planet, says Edward O. Wilson in his most impassioned book to date. Half-Earth argues that the situation facing us is too large to be solved piecemeal and proposes a solution commensurate with the magnitude of the problem: dedicate fully half the surface of the Earth to nature. If we are to undertake such an ambitious endeavor, we first must understand just what the biosphere is, why it's essential to our survival, and the manifold threats now facing it. In doing so, Wilson describes how our species, in only a mere blink of geological time, became the architects and rulers of this epoch and outlines the consequences of this that will affect all of life, both ours and the natural world, far into the future. Half-Earth provides an enormously moving and naturalistic portrait of just what is being lost when we clip "twigs and eventually whole branches of life's family tree." In elegiac prose, Wilson documents the many ongoing extinctions that are imminent, paying tribute to creatures great and small, not the least of them the two Sumatran rhinos whom he encounters in captivity. Uniquely, Half-Earth considers not only the large animals and star species of plants but also the millions of invertebrate animals and microorganisms that, despite being overlooked, form the foundations of Earth's ecosystems. In stinging language, he avers that the biosphere does not belong to us and addresses many fallacious notions such as the idea that ongoing extinctions can be balanced out by the introduction of alien species into new ecosystems or that extinct species might be brought back through cloning. This includes a critique of the "anthropocentrists," a fashionable collection of revisionist environmentalists who believe that the human species alone can be saved through engineering and technology. Despite the Earth's parlous condition, Wilson is no doomsayer, resigned to fatalism. Defying prevailing conventional wisdom, he suggests that we still have time to put aside half the Earth and identifies actual spots where Earth's biodiversity can still be reclaimed. Suffused with a profound Darwinian understanding of our planet's fragility, Half-Earth reverberates with an urgency like few other books, but it offers an attainable goal that we can strive for on behalf of all life. 25 illustrations

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Customer Reviews

Edward O. Wilson is angry, and so is his book. No one is listening and things have gotten unbelievably worse. There's no evidence to provide any real hope. He describes future paleontologists easily identifying the sedimentary layers of our era by the amount of chemicals and plastics in the soil strata, by the fragments of machines and weapons everywhere, and the lack of varied species identified. This is our legacy. As I have written elsewhere, it took the Earth four billion years to reach the Holocene, an era where climate, ice, water and life achieved a state of pleasant equilibrium, with jet streams and ocean currents arranged in a virtuous circle. In just the last 150 years, Homo sapiens has upset the entire system, killing off the Holocene in favor of the Anthropocene, in which one invasive species rules, and any other species that does not add to its immediate benefit can be eliminated. And if even if it does add to its benefit, if it hasn't been domesticated, it can still face extinction. We are clear-cutting the biosphere. The book is a relentless, hard-hitting indictment of our custodianship. We are far worse than negligent; we are malevolent. We think it does no harm to remove a species from its environs and its role. The way it really works, Wilson says, is there are no species living on the periphery; every species depends on other species or is critical to their survival. Our total disregard of this simple rule causes unpredictable disaster. Wilson has been a naturalist all his long life, and it pains him to find things in this state. His childlike appreciation comes through, often overtaking his anger with the wonder of various species and how they live and contribute so differently.

E O Wilson is one of the world's most renowned scientists and thinkers, a man who has devoted his life to the study and conservation of nature. Now approaching 86, he has spent the last few years making an increasingly urgent set of pleas to the rest of us to preserve our planet. In this book which can be regarded as the last offering in a trilogy, he describes the story of the interaction

between humans and the rest of nature and makes an appeal to us to save the natural world. Wilson uses an argument based partly on our emotional and practical kinship with nature and partly on our ability to come up with smart technology to try to convince us that we need to save half the planet for other species. It's not entirely clear where the number half comes from, but as he says, reasonable calculations indicate that about 80 percent of species will be conserved in the future if we save that particular area of the planet. About half of the book itself is devoted to a lucid description of biodiversity. Wilson illustrates the grand variety of living creatures around us ranging from snakes and monkeys to ants and bacteria and tells us the story of how so many of these creatures were destroyed in various extinction events, for instance of the kind that annihilated the dinosaurs. As other thinkers have documented we seem to be in a new era of extinction, this one deliberately initiated by human beings. Wilson is also adept at evoking the feeling of excitement one feels when he or she visits a rainforest or a riverbank teeming with life; his own unique experiences of travel and experience help us appreciate this feeling. The argument for preserving the natural world is one that Wilson and others have made before, but he makes it here again with reason and references.

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