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Requiem For Nature



Synopsis

Ecologist John Terborgh has been witness to the relentless onslaught of civilization in some of the remotest areas of the planet. Here he raises urgent questions: is enough being done to protect nature? Are current conservation efforts succeeding? Terborgh makes the case that nature can be saved - but that the greatest challenges are social, economic and political rather than scientific.

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Customer Reviews

How do we save the tropical rainforests of the world, answering the clarion call of so many environmental groups? For John Terborgh, a tropical biologist, the answer is dark and sobering: despite our best intentions, we may not be able to, for we lack both a coherent plan and, starkly put, the political will to do so. Sustainable development, "the mantra of the conservation movement," is of small help, Terborgh believes, because the realities of economic development are such that where the needs of humans are weighed against the needs of the natural world, nature always loses. Ecotourism, heralded as a model of economic possibility, is not much better because the novelty of seeing giant trees soon wears off and the chances of seeing wildlife are few ("restricted visibility means that most animals are not detected until the visitor is already well within the animal's flight distance, the distance at which a creature flees in the presence of a human"). If we're to save old-growth forests, Terborgh suggests, we'll have to suspend all economic activity in them, ending logging, prospecting, and recreation; only if we leave them alone do they have much of a chance. It's a grim view, and one that is unlikely to take much sway, no matter how correct it might be.

Terborgh notes as much himself in his well-argued polemic, writing, "Whether we like it or not, tropical forests are worth more dead than alive. Nothing can save them short of a sea change in public opinion that registers not only in politicians' statements but also in their actions. Saving biodiversity will have to become a global obsession, not merely a pastime." --Gregory McNamee

Development by humans is rapidly overwhelming the natural environment, according to Terborgh. Already, he says, "the global balance stands at roughly 5 percent for nature (counting only parks and other strict nature preserves) and 95 percent for humans," and the inevitable growth of the human population will make matters worse. Moreover, parks as they are now operated rarely work well. Even in developed countries, they are often too small to encompass the full spectrum of plant and animal life, and in developing countries they are poorly run. Terborgh, a professor of environmental science and botany at Duke University, has a few suggestions for improving the situation--national conservation trust funds, strict policing of protected areas and the internationalization of nature protection--but he does not seem optimistic that they will be widely adopted.

Starts off with an interesting account of the author's years spent in Peru's Manu national park, supposedly one of the most biodiverse in the world, describing its ups and downs over the years from the 1980s up to late 90s as governing authorities change. Even in this secluded park in one of the better preserved regions of the tropics, development is slowly encroaching from within as remote native tribes begin to get more assimilated with the outside civilization. Terborgh, an eminent tropical field biologist then goes on to give a brief survey of other tropical regions in Africa and Asia, lamenting the lack of enforcement and stable regimes to maintain the preservation of species after protected areas are created. Indeed, as the book progresses, the tone becomes increasingly pessimistic as the conventional reasons for preserving rainforests such as non-timber product harvesting, untapped medicinal resource and ecotourism are revealed as fallacies. In a society where economics prevails, wildlands will always be worth less in monetary terms compared to intensively used landscapes. The concept of oft touted sustainable development is really quite an unachievable ideal, while 'integrated development and conservation' projects that are the current fashion of international conservation NGOs are a huge drain on funds that do not contribute at all to the protection of wildlife. Finally, the author argues that untouched nature is best left in the hands of a central government rather than private ownership that will hasten its liquidation, citing the experience of the United States where such remaining landscapes are mostly held by the federal

government. However, as institutions are weak and governments are unstable and corrupt in the tropics, they cannot be relied upon in this respect, so it is proposed that an international governing and enforcement body somewhat like the UN Peacekeepers is created for the job of protecting tropical forests. Farfetched perhaps, but alternatives are truly limited and we need more of such brainstorming. Terborgh is at his best writing about science and explaining the intricacies of tropical ecology, as when he describes the slow but insidious effects of habitat fragmentation, trophic cascades and the like. He begins to talk in generalities when discussing conservation issues that spill into the social arena. The view of the future of tropical forests from a professional conservation biologist is indeed disheartening but probably best reflects the reality of a mainstream culture that does not respect nature nor care much beyond material consumption.

John Terborgh has written a book that is a must read for anyone involved or interested in the protection of biodiversity through reserves and parks in the tropics. This book contains content that is tough to swallow but like a prescribed bitter pill hopefully it will have a salubrious effect. I am not a biologist or professional park administrator but as a member of a board of directors on a regional land conservation organization. I will be recommending this book to all on the board. Through my travels in Africa, Central America, and South America I can understand the plight of the parks that Terborgh describes. His experience and his passion for biodiversity show in the book and as I read it I found it hard to put down. Reading this was like attending an excellent lecture knowing that the speaker was presenting a clear assessment of the situation and a novel and important directive to solve the problems. Terborgh brings up startling facts in the book such as the entire funding for tropical conservation by all conservation organizations in the United States totals \$200 million per year. This again is for every country, every continent, all the tropical parks. Yet within the United States the National Park Service has funding of 1.7 billion per year and is underfunded. If you consider the difference in species diversity in one park such as Manu National Park in Peru with a possible 1,000 species of birds compared to all of North America north of Mexico with about 700 species you can understand the significance of protecting these sites. I hope that many people will read this and that many more will take action to rectify the problems that Terborgh has written about.

Requiem for Nature is partly about the Cocha Cashu research station and the wilderness around it, and partly about global wilderness preservation. It supports a couple lines of thought that our office (which is engaged in supporting conservation) has discussed.-- Wrong Conservation Parameters:

Terborgh speculates that wilderness transformation is baked in to present conservation efforts, because the size of the areas (even if successfully preserved) is too small to preserve top predators. The resulting knock-on effects mean that the wilderness that we see (e.g., primary forest) cannot reproduce itself. Received wilderness will look much the same from the tourist's point of view for some decades, but afterwards it will be succeeded by ecosystems whose features are hard to predict except that they will presumably have to be much less biodiverse than what we received. This is true on all continents, although Terborgh says the U.S. is in better shape than others thanks to the extent of land owned by the national government.-- Population Growth and Migration: The indigenous near Cocha Cashu included some families that started the path to assimilation during Terborgh's years at the station. This group re-settled slightly nearer the station, started trading for tools, and soon fissioned into four settlements through household formation by the pioneers' children. Terborgh concludes that the combination of their changed numbers and practices will eventually convert the wilderness, unless they are re-located outside the area susceptible to preservation. He thinks this is feasible and that the indigenous might like it, but that it is unlikely to be the course that will be chosen. (Population growth in general is the reason why areas available for conservation are too small.) He discusses a number of conservation approaches, with the one that seems to me most promising being TNC-type private purchases and donations of land, if massively financed by high-income countries. NB: Terborgh wrote before Peru's protected-areas agency began contracting national park management to NGOs, and he didn't discuss carbon credits as a source of preservation financing (it may not have gotten very far by 1999). He nonetheless thought that wilderness conservation globally has its best chance in South America, and he emphasizes enforcement as a necessary ingredient. Terborgh's mention of topsoil loss (twenty times the natural replacement rate in Missouri, while USDA standards accept loss at only five times the replacement rate) made me wonder whether this is a bigger long-term issue (e.g., 150 years) than I had thought. We have only been farming that land industrially for about 100 years now.

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