

# Book review – *Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life*

“For the first time in history a conviction has developed among those who can actually think more than a decade ahead that we are playing a global endgame. Humanity’s grasp on the planet is not strong. It is growing weaker.” (p 1)

“The Half-Earth proposal offers a first, emergency solution commensurate with the magnitude of the problem: I am convinced that only by setting aside half the planet in reserve, or more, can we save the living part of the environment and achieve the stabilization required for our own survival.” (p 3)

**E**O Wilson has a towering presence among those, including myself, interested in the natural world. His knowledge of that world is immense, and he shares it freely in his books.

The ecosphere, which both birthed life and constitutes its only source of nurture, has been stable and able to support all life including us. This is because it is composed of an immense number of very diverse species, living on a healthy Earth, which together create the web of life. This symbiosis is being smashed by human activity. Everywhere extinctions are rampant and the numbers within species still extant are being significantly and disastrously reduced.<sup>1</sup> The current anthropocentric paradigm, for me, is the source of the problem. Unfortunately for this book, and life in general, this view is not much expressed by Wilson.

## The problem

The source of *The Problem* (Section one) is glaringly obvious: humanity. Human-driven reductions and extinctions, notes Wilson, are accelerating; the reductions feed the

extinctions, and the resulting simplified ecosystems render the remaining species more vulnerable to continuing reductions and extinctions. Wilson estimates that perhaps half, but more likely fewer than a quarter, of current species will last to the end of the century, if present conditions persist. In time, a tipping point will be reached in ecosystems, with collapses resulting.

These things matter to us: Wilson makes the point, over and over again, that we are organisms and that we remain “absolutely dependent on other organisms” (p 12), which, in turn, depend on fully functioning ecosystems in which to live. Despite his obvious love for the natural world, Wilson usually states its benefits to humans as the reason to save it (see Chapter 2, “Humanity Needs A Biosphere”).

Wilson devotes a whole chapter to opposing the “Most Dangerous Worldview”, the Anthropocene idea. “Like most mistaken philosophies,” Wilson writes, “the Anthropocene worldview is largely a product of well-intentioned ignorance” (p 83).

## The real living world

The second section, *The Real Living World*, is rich with information about living species, ecosystems, their importance and how they are braided together. He questions that when “in most ecosystems even the identities of most of the species are unknown, how are biologists to define the many processes of their interactions?” (p 89). Good question! And further down the page: “To save biodiversity, it is necessary to obey the precautionary principle in the treatment of Earth’s natural ecosystems, and to do so strictly.”

Later, he observes: “Overall, theorists have not been able to grasp the near-bottomless complexity of the real world” (p 102). Wilson

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### Citation

Whyte I (2017) Book review – *Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life*. *The Ecological Citizen* 1: 101–2.

### Keywords

Biodiversity; protected areas; self-interest; wildlands

### About the book

Author: **Wilson EO**

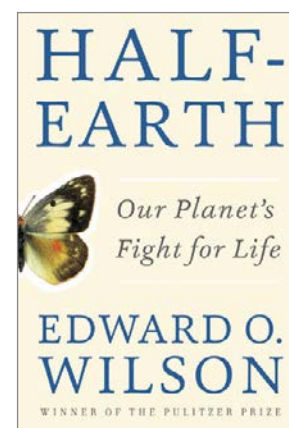
Year: **2016**

Publisher:

**Liveright**

Hardback ISBN:

**978-1631490828**



is certain that, in principle, owing to the limits of knowledge in both the species present and their interactions, mathematical models cannot work.

### The solution

The third section, *The Solution*, starts well with the statement, “The only solution to the ‘Sixth Extinction’ is to increase the area of inviolable natural reserves to half the surface of the Earth or greater” (p 167). However, the reasons to preserve biodiversity remain anthropocentric (p 173):

The pivotal conclusion to be drawn remains forever the same: by destroying most of the biosphere with archaic short-term methods, we are setting ourselves up for a self-inflicted disaster.

Contrary to what I believe is compelling evidence, Wilson expects the world population to decline on its own owing to the good effects of bettering the condition of women. Somehow, he believes, the free-market system combined with high technology will lessen the human footprint. Here, Moore’s law is evoked, although it applies to transistors. Several improbable things “will” happen, although how is not explained: the footprint will reduce; a shift will take place in worldview from quantity to quality; more will be done with less; the biosphere will no longer be a commodity; and technology will save us. Growing “if we are lucky (and smart)” to over 10 billion by 2100, both population and footprint will decline because “we are thinking organisms trying to understand how the world works. We will come awake” (p 205). Where is the hope in this, when by Wilson’s own estimate, mentioned earlier, that it is likely for fewer than a quarter of current species to last till the end of the century?

I see it as more than a little strange that such faith is put in the current paradigm’s ability to reach the goal of protecting half of Earth. It is odd that Wilson, who so obviously loves the Earth, her ecosystems and her life, can find and state no stronger reasons for humanity to reform than narrow self-interest. Nowhere is beauty mentioned, is

deep ecology promoted, or is life’s value for itself cited. Nowhere is it stressed that the Earth is the matrix which birthed us along with the rest of life.

The desperate need for an ecocentric paradigm, a need made obliquely obvious by many passages in the book, is never made explicit. The closest Wilson comes is a sentence, buried in a paragraph about the economy: “The central idea is to view the planet as an ecosystem, to see Earth as it is and not as we wish it to be” (p 193). Near the end of the book, it is plainly stated that human needs are the reason to act: “It is past time to broaden the discussion of the human future and connect it to the rest of life” (p 207). And later: “Only a major shift in moral reasoning, with greater commitment given to the rest of life, can meet this greatest challenge of the century” (p 211). This welcome analysis is incomplete, as it is driven by concerns for human needs. Wilson’s analysis, I believe, suffers from the conflict between his obvious love of Earth’s life and his relatively uncritical acceptance of humanity’s current death-dealing paradigm.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, this book contains conflicting juxtapositions, without resolving the sharply conflicting views. On one hand, Wilson’s nature writing is excellent, as is his understanding of the catastrophic problem and its only solution: preserving at least half the Earth in an effectively wild state. For these things alone, it is a book well worth reading. The case for absolutely preserving at least half the Earth is well made. Earth’s life is collapsing; half the Earth is required to reverse the collapse; what could be stronger? On the other hand, he accepts business as usual, with tweaks, as the solution. Such acceptance strains credulity.

It would have been a much stronger book if Wilson had given free rein to his evident love for the Earth and drawn the obvious conclusion: it is humanity which must radically change. Wilson’s closing words, while offering insufficient advice, at least point to the needed path: “It is simple and easy to say: Do no further harm to the biosphere” (p 212). ■

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Those wishing to learn more can download the WWF’s 74-page report at <https://is.gd/rcbOx9> or the eighteen-page summary at <https://is.gd/A6Q2cg>.