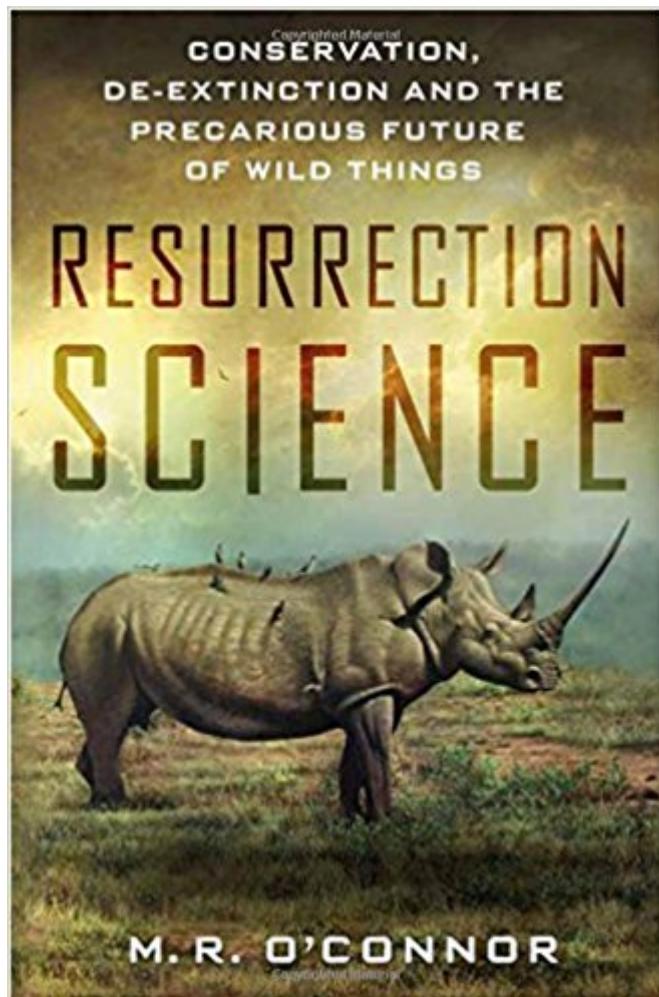


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Resurrection Science: Conservation, De-Extinction And The Precarious Future Of Wild Things



Synopsis

A Library Journal Best Book of 2015 **A Christian Science Monitor Top Ten Book of September**In a world dominated by people and rapid climate change, species large and small are increasingly vulnerable to extinction. In Resurrection Science, journalist M. R. O'Connor explores the extreme measures scientists are taking to try and save them, from captive breeding and genetic management to de-extinction. Paradoxically, the more we intervene to save species, the less wild they often become. In stories of sixteenth-century galleon excavations, panther-tracking in Florida swamps, ancient African rainforests, Neanderthal tool-making, and cryogenic DNA banks, O'Connor investigates the philosophical questions of an age in which we "play god" with earth's biodiversity. Each chapter in this beautifully written book focuses on a unique species--from the charismatic northern white rhinoceros to the infamous passenger pigeon--and the people entwined in the animals' fates. Incorporating natural history and evolutionary biology with conversations with eminent ethicists, O'Connor's narrative goes to the heart of the human enterprise: What should we preserve of wilderness as we hurtle toward a future in which technology is present in nearly every aspect of our lives? How can we co-exist with species when our existence and their survival appear to be pitted against one another?

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Customer Reviews

I received a free copy of this book from Netgalley in exchange for an honest review. This book was phenomenal. M.R. O'Connor did an excellent job of examining not only the question of extinction and the controversial subject of de-extinction (spearheaded by the fine people of Revive

& Restore), but of asking the very uncomfortable question “What is a species worth?” What is it that makes a person decide that one species is worth saving over another, and is saving a species from extinction truly a worthwhile endeavor? Does everything have an intrinsic value? The book is divided into 8 chapters, each focusing upon a different species either going extinct, or possibly being revived. For those interested the subjects of the chapters are as follows: Spray ToadsFlorida PanthersWhite Sands PupfishNorthern Right WhalesHawaiian CrowNorthern White RhinoPassenger PigeonNeanderthalEach species discussed raises a different question regarding the course of extinction and conservation. Should we save or protect a species if doing so hurts the human community around it? At what point of hybridization does a species stop being what it originally was? If human interference is largely responsible for the differences between a species that has been fragmented “are they still the original endangered species? What can we do to protect endangered species we know very little about? What if breeding a creature in captivity ends up erasing the very behaviors that were the hallmark of the species? Would reviving a species artificially result in the same species? Is conservation on the ground more worth it than rescuing the genetic data? These questions and more abound, and are examined from all angles. The result is a book that looks at the ethical questions beyond conservation in a way that I’ve seldom seen discussed. This book is vitally important, engaging, and thought provoking. I would like nothing more than to see this book in the hands of everyone involved in the environmental movements. It asks uncomfortable questions and raises troubling points that need to be raised. I can’t emphasize enough how much I adored this text.

I went into M.R. O’Connor’s book thinking I knew where I stood on most conservation issues, but within the first few pages this book challenged me on many issues where I thought I’d long made up my mind. O’Connor does an excellent job of laying out meticulous arguments that will make you see conservation issues in a whole new light. She is a masterful story teller, weaving together tales of animals and humans that make this book a quick read. You’ll have fun reading it and it’s sure to challenge you to see the world in a new light. Definitely a must read!

When I graduated with a masters in environmental studies from Yale in ’89, the way in which we conceived of conservation was different than we do today. It took being completely engaged by this thoughtfully written book to really understand this. It probes deeper ideas about how we think about other species. It does this while touring how genomics is shaping the conservation of individual species, from the florida panther to the neanderthal (that’s part of the resurrection part). What

surprised me the most was how the author led me on the unexpected journey to discover that how human culture values other species is shifting. And she does this by telling the stories of individual species: white rhinos, African toads, small desert fish, Atlantic right whales and even those we eliminated, like the passenger pigeon, whose flocks once blocked out the sun. This is a book of fascinating side canyons. Maura very accessibly distills different disciplines (from different schools of philosophy to, yes, even quantum theory), offering different ways for us to think about our big 21st Century, very real choice...how biodiverse the Earth remains after the Anthropocene.

We've seen a number of books lately dealing with what has been called the *sixth extinction*, referring to the ongoing mass extinction event, and ways in which we might deal with the crisis. Elizabeth Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* and Beth Shapiro's *How To Clone a Mammoth: The Science of De-extinction* are two excellent examples of such titles (I'd also include, though not quite as directly related, Michael Tennesen's *The Next Species*). Now you can add *Resurrection Science: Conservation, De-extinction and the Precarious Future of Wild Things* by M.R. O'Connor to the list. While all three begin with the same premise "that current mass extinction scientists say we're all living through it" and do to some extent overlap, each has its own particular angle. Kolbert's gives a good sense of historical (on a geological timescale) context, explaining the first five events and then moving into current issues. Shapiro, meanwhile, is much more focused on de-extinction and in particular the detailed science behind it.

O'Connor also discusses de-extinction, but focuses far less on the science and much more on the philosophy of the concept, exploring the idea through the prism of conservation ethics, balancing the abstract and abstruse segments with concrete case studies/examples of creatures on the knife's edge of extinction. And more so than the other two, O'Connor seems more torn about the conflict between concern for nature/animals and compassion for one fellow human being, saying one of the questions at the core of conservation ethics is, "What is a species worth?" The starting point for O'Connor's sense of conflict was the discovery of a new species "a spray toad--at the base of a waterfall in Tanzania that held up construction of a major hydropower plant, where less than half of its city residents and only 2% of its rural inhabitants have access to electricity. As she writes, "I felt my own sympathy for the cause of conservation challenged by the little warty toad in electricity-starved Tanzania." This prompts her to seek out Holmes Rolston III, whom she calls "the father of the field of environmental ethics." Thus begins a journey that will take her across the world and back in

time, either literally or through research, as she explores eight creatures, including the Southern White Rhino of Africa, the North Atlantic right whale, Florida panthers, the White Sands pupfish, the passenger pigeon, and even our own cousins the Neanderthal. Along the way she examines basic questions such as what is a species (the complexity and multiplicity of answers may surprise you), how fast does evolution take place (another possibly surprising answer if you haven't paid attention lately), is an extinct animal recovered by genetics the same animal, is an animal no longer in its natural habitat (because we've destroyed it) the same animal, does the possibility of de-extinction mean we will care less about conservation and preservation, do captive breeding programs or the possibility of de-extinction via genetics offer any hope, and others. The excursion is fascinating, especially in that O'Connor focuses much more on the philosophical/ethical questions than I've seen in books on the same topic, though she never wends so far afield from the real world that the reader feels a sense of detachment. And while she does deal with the science, it is with a relatively light touch and the science-challenged will certainly have no difficulties. Just as important, O'Connor never loses touch with the human side of things, offering up vividly sharp portraits of several important players, philosophers and scientists but especially the non-academics, such as the man who for decades was the best-known hunters of mountain lions in the Southwest and Mexico and who later became the go-to person for saving the Florida panthers, the widow whose personal project led to both a major archaeological find and an entire re-thinking of what happened with the North Atlantic right whale, or the wife who moved to one of the most remote places on the planet. O'Connor's passion for nature are evident throughout, which makes her balanced approach all the more impressive. The questions are deep, but the answers are few. At least so far. Instead, O'Connor leaves us to ponder on our own the ethics and morality of what is occurring and what is coming down the road, even as the science, and the extinctions, keep churning forward. A thoughtful, fascinating look at our world, our impact on it, and the choices we will soon be asked to make. Highly recommended on its own, and as part of the group of similarly themed books mentioned above. (review first appeared on fantasyliterature.com)

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