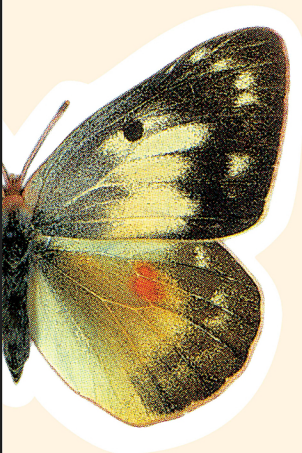


NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER

“A brave expression of hope, a visionary blueprint for saving the planet.”

—STEPHEN GREENBLATT, author of *The Swerve*

HALF- EARTH



*Our Planet's
Fight for Life*

EDWARD O.
WILSON

WINNER OF THE PULITZER PRIZE

Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life

by E.O. Wilson

Prologue

What is man?

Storyteller, mythmaker, and destroyer of the living world. Thinking with a gabble of reason, emotion, and religion. Lucky accident of primate evolution during the late Pleistocene. Mind of the biosphere. Magnificent in imaginative power and exploratory drive, yet yearning to be more master than steward of a declining planet. Born with the capacity to survive and evolve forever, able to render the biosphere eternal also. Yet arrogant, reckless, lethally predisposed to favor self, tribe, and short-term futures. Obsequious to imagined higher beings, contemptuous toward lower forms of 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. Our population is too large for safety and comfort. Fresh water is growing short, the atmosphere and the seas are increasingly polluted as a result of what has transpired on the land. The climate is changing in ways unfavorable to life, except for microbes, jellyfish, and fungi. For many species it is already fatal.

Because the problems created by humanity are global and progressive, because the prospect of a point of no return is fast approaching, the problems can't be solved piecemeal. There is just so much water left for fracking, so much rain forest cover available for soybeans and oil palms, so much room left in the atmosphere to store excess carbon.

Meanwhile, we thrash about, appallingly led, with no particular goal in mind other than economic growth, unfettered consumption, good health, and personal happiness. The impact on the rest of the biosphere is everywhere negative, the environment becoming unstable and less pleasant, our long-term future less certain.

I've written Half-Earth as the last of a trilogy that describes how our species became the architects and rulers of the Anthropocene epoch, bringing consequences that will affect all of life, both ours and that of the natural world, far into the geological future. In *The Social Conquest of Earth*, I described why advanced social organization has been achieved only rarely in the animal kingdom, and then late in the 3.8-billion-year history of life on Earth. I reviewed

the evidence of what transpired when the phenomenon emerged in one species of large-sized African primates.

In *The Meaning of Human Existence*, I reviewed what science tells us about our sensory system (surprisingly weak) and moral reasoning (conflicted and shaky), and why both the system and reasoning are deficient for the purposes of modern humanity. Like it or not, we remain a biological species in a biological world, wondrously well adapted to the peculiar conditions of the planet's former living environment, albeit tragically not this environment or the one we are creating. In body and soul we are children of the Holocene, the epoch that created us, yet far from well adapted to its successor, the Anthropocene.

In *Half-Earth* I propose that only by committing half of the planet's surface to nature can we hope to save the immensity of life-forms that compose it. I'll identify the unique blend of animal instinct and social and cultural genius that has launched our species and the rest of life on a potentially ruinous trajectory. We need a much deeper understanding of ourselves and the rest of life than the humanities and science have yet offered. We would be wise to find our way as quickly as possible out of the fever swamp of dogmatic religious belief and inept philosophical thought through which we still wander. Unless humanity learns a great deal more about global biodiversity and moves quickly to protect it, we will soon lose most of the species composing life on Earth. 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.

Why one-half? Why not one-quarter or one-third? Because large plots, whether they already stand or can be created from corridors connecting smaller plots, harbor many more ecosystems and the species composing them at a sustainable level. As reserves grow in size, the diversity of life surviving within them also grows. As reserves are reduced in area, the diversity within them declines to a mathematically predictable degree swiftly—often immediately and, for a large fraction, forever. A biogeographic scan of Earth's principal habitats shows that a full representation of its ecosystems and the vast majority of its species can be saved within half the planet's surface. At one-half and above, life on Earth enters the safe zone. Within half, existing calculations from existing ecosystems indicate that more than 80 percent of the species would be stabilized.

There is a second, psychological argument for protecting half of Earth. The current conservation movement has not been able to go the distance because it is a process. It targets the most endangered habitats and species and works forward from there. Knowing that the conservation

window is closing fast, it strives to add increasing amounts of protected space, faster and faster, saving as much as time and opportunity will allow.

Half-Earth is different. It is a goal. People understand and prefer goals. They need a victory, not just news that progress is being made. It is human nature to yearn for finality, something achieved by which their anxieties and fears are put to rest. We stay afraid if the enemy is still at the gate, if bankruptcy is still possible, if more cancer tests may yet prove positive. It is further our nature to choose large goals that while difficult are potentially game-changing and universal in benefit. To strive against odds on behalf of all of life would be humanity at its most noble.

[Read Half-Earth: Our Planet's Fight for Life](#)