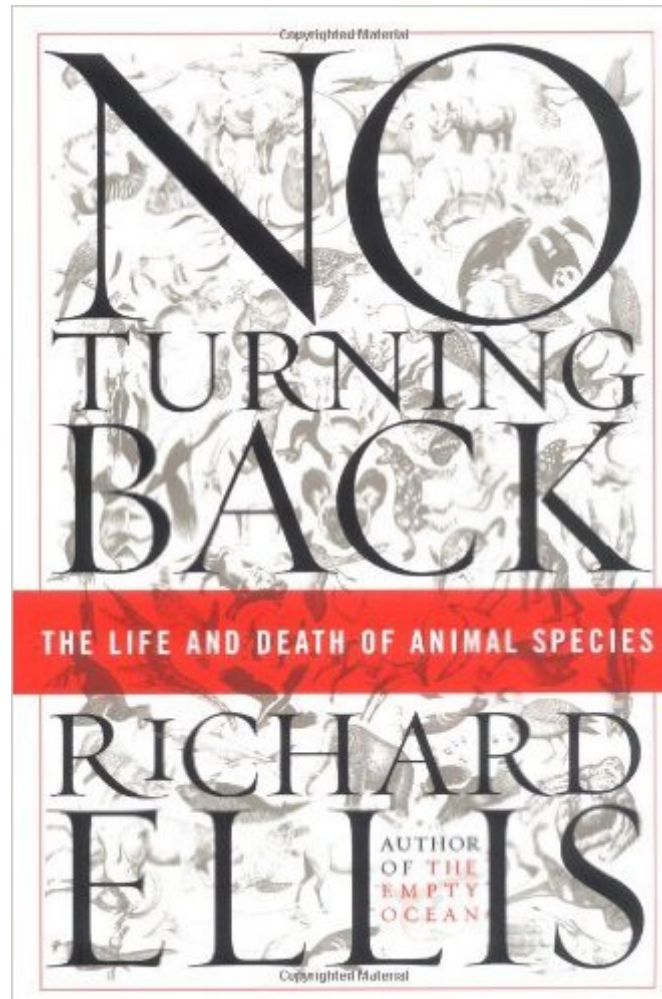


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No Turning Back: The Life And Death Of Animal Species



Synopsis

A noted naturalist's fascinating inquiry into the life and death of animal species. Just about every species that has ever lived on earth is extinct. The trilobites, which dominated the ocean floors for 300 million years, are gone. The last of the dinosaurs was wiped out by a Mount Everest-sized meteorite that slammed into the earth 65 million years ago. The great flying reptiles are gone, and so are the marine reptiles, some of them larger than a humpback whale. Before humans crossed the Bering land bridge some 15,000 years ago, North America was populated by mastodons, mammoths, saber-toothed tigers, and cave bears. They too are MIA. Passenger pigeons once flew over North America in flocks that numbered in the billions; the last one died in 1914. In this book you will meet creatures that were driven to extinction even more recently, as well as some that were brought back from the brink. You will even encounter animals not known to exist until recently -- an antidote to extinction.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"No Turning Back" is a hybrid of several other books on the subject that I have read:

"Extinction-Evolution and the end of man" by Michael Boulter, "The Sixth Extinction" by Richard Leakey, and "Song of the Dodo" by David Quammen. Interestingly enough, the blurbs on the back cover are for other books written by Ellis, not this one. His thirteen or so previous books all dealt with sea life. Ellis is an excellent writer. This book is well-researched and full of interesting facts. You would think that I would know a thing or two about extinction judging from the books I have read on

the subject but I learned a lot from this one. For example, hyperdisease is a disease capable of wiping out an entire species. Irrevocable evidence of just such a disease has been found in the most recent bones of Mastodons. It is assumed by the timing of the epidemic to have been spread by people and their dogs. We may be witnessing the same thing with the frogs of the world. I do not want to give too much of the book away, but you can count on seeing lots of good tidbits like this. Anything a lay person would want to know about the topic of extinction in general is covered. He also talks about species that have been brought back from the brink, the probability of resurrecting extinct species, and new species that have been discovered. If you do not already know much about extinction, this book will be fascinating. Personally, I am less interested in ancient extinction events than in finding solutions to halt the one currently in progress. Ellis finishes his book with the standard ominous suggestion that humanity may be positioning itself for extinction. This warning bell has been ringing out since 1962 when Rachel Carson wrote "Silent Spring."

The book intends to be a broad compendium of extinction, beginning with prehistoric mass extinctions, then going forward in time to its main emphasis on man-made extinctions. The book can really be separated into parts I and II, which report and speculate on prehistoric extinction theories, and part III ("Finale") which accounts for 2/3 of the book and is a fairly haphazard menagerie of extinct or critically endangered species. The entire book skips around a lot, most evidently in Part III, which makes it difficult to follow. It is as if the author summarized all the articles he had in his file cabinet - the files simply being "mammals" or "oceans." The book is an interesting, if winding, road through various "fun facts" of extinction. That said, the author misses the mark on some of his arguments - most notably his speculations about the Pleistocene mass extinctions. Despite correlating these extinctions with human migrations, he insists that most Pleistocene megafauna were killed by "hyperdisease," This, despite the author's inclusion that "no disease known to science is capable of killing off an entire species," let alone several - all of which happen to be large and very huntable. The book also displays a shocking number of taxonomic errors. Most striking is the glaring misunderstanding of what a subspecies is - inexcusable for a biological author. Species and subspecies are confused routinely. Sentences such as "There are three distinct species and one subspecies" are understood by biologists to be patently wrong. Within the same bewildering paragraph, the author describes two forms of tigers, followed by a sentence describing eight subspecies, five of which are living.

No Turning Back: The Life and Death of Animal Species (2004) suffers the same problems that has

plagued other books written by Ellis: an excessive use of quoting and - at least for cetaceans (whales, dolphins, and porpoises) - dumb mistakes. The first several chapters deal with extinctions and why they may have occurred. Here Ellis goes in circles, telling you the same theories again and again, often quoting article abstracts (which make me suspect he didn't even bother read much of the articles themselves). In later chapters he tries to cover the plight of as many species as possible, but in the process says almost nothing about certain species or how they really went extinct. When dealing with cetaceans, he apparently forgot what he had even said in earlier works (e.g., he once again forgot that the Dutch whaling settlement of Smeerenburg was settled well before the first overwintering in 1633-34) and doesn't appear to read his sources closely enough (e.g. Ellis believes Omura's whale, only described in 2003, must be very rare because the majority of the paratypes were caught in the East China Sea - where a lot of modern whaling occurred - when in fact they had been taken near the Solomon Islands, where very little modern whaling actually took place). Ellis also has a problem with dates, stating that British bowhead whaling in the Davis Strait region ended around 1860, when it didn't end until several decades later - you would think someone who wrote an entire chapter on this subject in an earlier book (Men & Whales, 1991) would recall this? If he made such silly mistakes on a subject he's published extensively on, imagine all the mistakes he's made throughout the book? That's a little scary to think about. What could've been a very interesting read turned into a struggle to finish.

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