

Intricacy and infinity: A tribute to EO Wilson

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Tony is a writer, and his most recent book is *Rescuing the Planet: Protecting half the land to heal the Earth* (2022).

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The first time I met EO Wilson, at a lunch in his Harvard office, I got to see what a charmer he was. “Call me Ed,” he said instantly, warmly. But it wasn’t until the second time we met, and unexpectedly spent a week together in the Florida Panhandle, that I could see just why his writing and thinking about nature is so effective, so compelling, so helpful, and has left such an indelible mark.

I was just starting to work on *Rescuing the Planet*, my book about staving off the mass extinction crisis, so naturally I wanted to check in with the ‘father of biodiversity’. We ate deli sandwiches washed down with Diet Dr Pepper and pored over maps. He was 82, clearly undiminished, an amazingly quick study, and he talked authoritatively about retaining large wild areas and smaller hotspots. I mentioned the possibility of connecting them all with long natural corridors, sinews of the biosphere. Of course, this would mean conserving a lot more land, something close to ... “Half Earth,” I said, out of the blue.

“Yes!” he said, getting excited. Half Earth was sound science, just what animals and plants needed, but beyond that, “if you boldly assert a goal as something entirely reasonable and feasible, people will remember, argue and think.” This would “empower Americans to dream about a changed country where you’re never beyond the reach of a national park” – where parks and wildlife are always in the foreground of our lives and the forefront of our minds. “We like to say national parks are the best idea the country ever had,” he went on. “Now let’s take it to the next level.”

We stayed in touch. Ed notably went on to write *Half-Earth: Our planet’s fight for life* (2016), and he set up the Half-Earth Project and launched Half-Earth Day to celebrate biodiversity and its protection (<https://www.half-earthproject.org/>).

A year after that lunch, Ed invited me to accompany him on what was supposed to be a quick barnstorming tour of the Southeast USA to help support the work of his friend, MC Davis, who was endowing an ambitious 300-year project in the Florida Panhandle to rescue longleaf pine (*Pinus palustris*), once

the gorgeous heart of the area's ecosystem. Then we'd scoot over to Mobile, Alabama, Ed's hometown, where he was part of an informal group agitating quietly to create a quarter-million-acre national park next door to the city. MC said he was "going to work Ed like a borrowed mule."

But on our first day in Florida, Ed was hospitalized with a stroke. Remarkably, he was out of the hospital in two days, and then convalesced for the next five days in MC's spacious guest cottage. Ed asked me to stick around for company. Recuperation was rapid and the setting definitely accelerated his healing – he was in a landscape he loved. MC's staff plied him with home-cooked Southern dinners, a fish fry one night, chicken-and-dumplings the next; there was a stash of butter pecan ice cream in the fridge to raid while catching a movie with a gripping story on TV at night. We watched *Lincoln* and *Silence of the Lambs*.

Ed's recovery plan was simple: "Walk, write, nap. And chat." He got up at seven, as usual, to resume work on an essay – in longhand on a legal pad, as always. He often got the best ideas, he said, between four and seven in the morning. The hospital had sent him home with a walker. A day later he was brandishing it over his head as he marched around the cottage. By the following day he cast it aside.

One afternoon 'Turtle Bob' Walker, a Florida naturalist and an MC staffer beloved by kids, dropped by with a baby Eastern indigo snake (*Drymarchon couperi*), glistening black.

"Oh, my God," said Ed. "Just gorgeous! What a beautiful feel."

Ed and Bob swapped stories about tramping around the woods as kids. Ed told Bob about how to hypnotize a dragonfly, something he'd learned from a man whose father had passed down the trick. Dragonflies have big globular eyes with a nearly 360-degree field of vision, likely the best eyes of any insect. They'll dart away if you move near – instead, stand still and start waving your hands slightly. Put a finger out and the dragonfly will come perch, thinking you're vegetation in a bit of breeze.

In our chats, Ed roamed far and wide. He never thought much about death, he said, since his personal philosophy about the meaning of life was, "I want to be able to look back and say, my story was worth telling." He did bring up Half Earth: "Before I go to that great rainforest in the sky, I want to see everyone talking about it, and get it embedded in UN policy."

He particularly wanted to talk about the essay he was working on, tentatively titled, 'The return of scientific natural history (the telling of epics)'. Nowadays most biology, he said, is done in a lab or on a chalkboard. Work in the field, tallying up other species, is derided as boring, mere drudgery, dry cataloguing – even if it's more and more urgent as we actively dismantle so much of the biosphere: "Nature does not give up her secrets easily, we are told. But the secret is, it's not a secret. It's waiting there to be noticed."

Since Aristotle, Ed said, classification has been the beginning of science. But even before that there is the stage of discovery, which comes alive by using a different lens. "There are a series of frames of mind that can be entered into," he said, "and throwing open a wider window of awareness sets people on the royal road to intricacy and infinity." What gets revealed is a world of marvels,

and in its long glow, “every living species is the shining culmination of an evolutionary epic. It is a survivor, a champion, the best of the best, whose story has unfolded across thousands of millennia through continuous testing and renewal.”

“Well,” he added after a pause, “this has been a fine session of creative thinking for me. I sense humans are now poised on a knife edge between selfishness promptings and altruism promptings. How open any mind can be is a question that could be much better explored.”

Ed was 88 the last time I got to have lunch with him in his office (lobster and crab salad sandwiches and more Diet Dr Pepper). An old wall clock ticked away as we talked. He said he was being haunted by the words of ‘Shenandoah’ – the old folk song about rivers that’s been traced back to seventeenth-century French Canadian voyageurs –

*O Shenandoah,
I long to hear you,
Away, I’m bound away,
'cross the wide Missouri.*

Ed said he had a new plan: “I want to take my remaining years in wild places. All I’ll need is a comfortable motel within driving distance. With a TV at night.”

This didn’t happen. Instead, like most of us, he had to hole up at home during COVID. My own impression was that he was describing something COVID couldn’t interrupt, by staking out a permanent campsite between two frames of mind – the one he’d been trained in as a scientist and the wider awareness that had called out to him when he was hypnotizing dragonflies.

References

Hiss T (2022) *Rescuing the Planet: Protecting half the land to heal the Earth*. Vintage, New York, NY, USA.

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