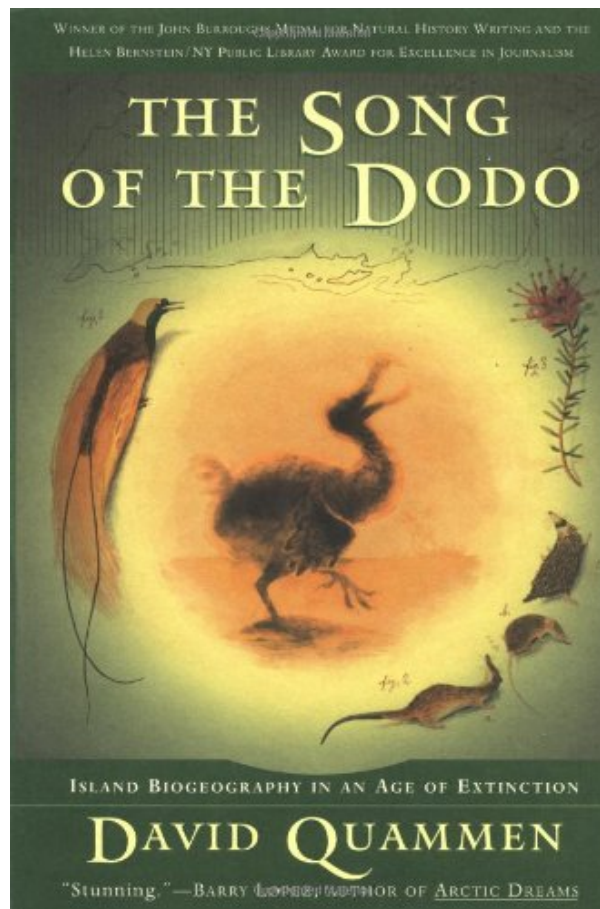


THE SONG OF THE DODO: ISLAND BIOGEOGRAPHY IN AN AGE OF EXTINCTION BY DAVID QUAMMEN



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THE SONG OF THE DODO



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DAVID QUAMMEN

"Stunning."—BARRY LOPEZ, AUTHOR OF *ARCTIC DREAMS*

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Amazon.com Review

In a wonderful weave of science, metaphor, and prose, David Quammen, author of *The Flight of the Iguana*, applies the lessons of island biogeography - the study of the distribution of species on islands and islandlike patches of landscape - to modern ecosystem decay, offering us insight into the origin and extinction of species, our relationship to nature, and the future of our world.

From Publishers Weekly

Quammen (*Natural Acts*) has successfully mixed genres in this highly impressive and thoroughly enjoyable work. The scientific journalism is first-rate, with the extremely technical field of island biogeography made fully accessible. We learn how the discipline developed and how it has changed conservation biology. And we learn just how critical this field is in the face of massive habitat destruction. The book is also a splendid example of natural history writing, for which Quammen traveled extensively. The Channel Islands off California and the Madagascan lemurs are captivatingly portrayed. Equally impressive are the character studies of the scientists who have been at the forefront of island biogeography. From his extended historical analysis of the journeys and insights of 19th-century biologist Alfred Russell Wallace to his field and laboratory interviews with many of the men and women who have followed in Wallace's intellectual wake, Quammen delightfully adds the human dimension to his discussion of science and natural history. Using a canvas as large as the world, he masterfully melds anecdotes about swimming elephants, collecting fresh feces from arboreal primates in Brazil and searching for the greater bird of paradise on the tiny island of Aru into an irreverent masterpiece. That a book on so technical a subject could be so enlightening, humorous and engaging is an extraordinary achievement. Author tour.

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From Library Journal

The self-contained ecosystem is again used as a benchmark in this study of evolution and extinction by the author of *Natural Acts* (LJ 3/15/85).

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THE SONG OF THE DODO: ISLAND BIOGEOGRAPHY IN AN AGE OF EXTINCTION BY DAVID QUAMMEN PDF

David Quammen's book, *The Song of the Dodo*, is a brilliant, stirring work, breathtaking in its scope, far-reaching in its message -- a crucial book in precarious times, which radically alters the way in which we understand the natural world and our place in that world. It's also a book full of entertainment and wonders.

In *The Song of the Dodo*, we follow Quammen's keen intellect through the ideas, theories, and experiments of prominent naturalists of the last two centuries. We trail after him as he travels the world, tracking the subject of island biogeography, which encompasses nothing less than the study of the origin and extinction of all species. Why is this island idea so important? Because islands are where species most commonly go extinct -- and because, as Quammen points out, we live in an age when all of Earth's landscapes are being chopped into island-like fragments by human activity.

Through his eyes, we glimpse the nature of evolution and extinction, and in so doing come to understand the monumental diversity of our planet, and the importance of preserving its wild landscapes, animals, and plants. We also meet some fascinating human characters. By the book's end we are wiser, and more deeply concerned, but Quammen leaves us with a message of excitement and hope.

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Most helpful customer reviews

50 of 54 people found the following review helpful.

Thoughtful, entertaining, and important

By Douglas A. Greenberg

The Song of the Dodo is a very long book on what some of us believe to be a vitally important subject, the ongoing loss of worldwide bioversity. Anyone interested in the fate of the world's wild creatures and yes, the fate of the world itself should read it and will likely enjoy it.

David Quammen does an exemplary job of leading his readers through almost two centuries of significant ideas and debates related to "island biogeography," a subject which is a lot more interesting and certainly a lot more significant than it might sound. Begining with the fascinating story of the Darwin vs. Wallace story vis-a-vis "who really came up with the theory of evolution first?" Quammen goes on to explain and illustrate just why the biogeography of islands is so important to any consideration of biodiversity and wildlife conservation for the world as a whole.

In weaving this historical narrative, Quammen doesn't just encapsulate theories (though he does this in some detail), he takes his reader into the field where the sometimes abstract principles behind diversity/rarity/extinction are actually demonstrated through the predicaments faced by various creatures. Quammen ventures to the Aru Islands, the Galapagos, Madagascar, Guam, Tasmania, Mauritius, Barro Colorado Island in Panama, the Amazonian rain forest, and on and on. It's a veritable world tour of places where rare and endangered animals struggle for existence in a world where human encroachment is causing an alarming acceleration in the rate of species extinction.

Through his mostly fascinating discussion of places, species, and biogeographical theories and the people behind those theories, Quammen shows an unusual ability to restate abstruse ideas in clear and understandable terms. He also writes with humor, a gentle and humane world-view, and an excellent eye for empirical detail.

For me, the most painful chapter was "Rarity Unto Death," in which he recounts selected stories revealing how various animals (and peoples) have been lost to extinction. The discussions of the extinction of the dodo and other wild creatures are terribly sad; the horrifying tale of the demise of the Tasmanian aborigines is heart-rending and infuriating.

In the end, Quammen's workmanlike effort establishes a "big picture" demonstrating how small, isolated ecosystems render their wild inhabitants increasingly vulnerable to extinction. We come to see that the biological notion of "islands" applies increasingly not just to small land bodies surround by water, but to more and more of our continental ecosystems as they are carved up into isolated pockets of habitat through

human encroachment and development. Indeed, increasingly, the world's ecosystems are composed of various kinds of "islands," a situation that threatens to result in catastrophic losses of biodiversity over time. That the situation is not entirely hopeless for all creatures is shown by the remarkable, human-aided recovery of the Mauritius kestrel, rescued in recent years from the very brink of extinction. But certainly the message overall delivered by Quammen is not a comforting or upbeat one.

In a book of this length and scope, there inevitably will be sections that particular readers may not like. I found the chapter on theorists McArthur and Wilson a bit pedantic and boring in places, partly due to the very abstruse nature of their mathematical theories. However, it also irked me a bit that Quammen took such an awe-filled, uncritical attitude here, particularly in his worshipful presentation of his audience with the Great Man, Edward O. Wilson. Wilson is a towering figure in the history of biology and biography, certainly but a few words of criticism might have been in order here. Yes, the leftist activists of the mid-seventies were out of line in pouring water on Wilson's head at a scientific meeting and their accusations toward him vis-a-vis his theories of sociobiology were shrill and excessive. But the truth is that some of Wilson's human-related "speculations" in the final chapter of his book on sociobiology *were* overreaching, inappropriate, and yes, foolish, and he deserved some of the criticism he received. In providing a discussion of the furor raised by the mathematical grand theorizing proposed by MacArthur and Wilson and other scientists beginning in the sixties, Quammen also could have pointed out that the often emotional debate over "mathematical modeling" vs. "detailed, real world empirical research" took place (and in some ways, continues) not just in the biological sciences but in a large number of academic fields. Whereas it's easy to dismiss extremist critics of truly useful mathematical models as narrow-minded or antediluvian, the proliferation of derivative, marginal, and in some cases, fairly useless "quantitative models" has at times threatened to eviscerate various fields of study, emptying them of virtually all attention to empirical detail and rendering them arid and lifeless.

I also was just a tad disappointed in the book's final section, where Quammen pays all too short shrift, in my view, to the question of "so what?" as it relates to the ongoing loss of world biodiversity. He makes the point that human encroachment is creating mass extinctions, but really doesn't drive home his thoughts as to why urban dwellers with no plans to visit the rainforest or the Galapagos should really care. I guess to Quammen the tragedy represented by this trend is self-evident, but what's really frightening to some of us is just how easy it is for people to live out their lives without ever having to give a darn about these broad, long-term issues of biodiversity. The question, "Why should people care?" needed at least a bit more attention, I think. Overall, however, this is a fine, readable, well-crafted, and wonderful book. I salute David Quammen for his accomplishment.

23 of 24 people found the following review helpful.

A global trek for survival

By Stephen A. Haines

Over a couple of cold ones at the local pub, the good doctor and I burst out simultaneously: "I found this incredible book! You've got to read it!" It was, of course, Quammen. That's the kind of reaction this writer generates. His prose seizes your attention as he gently leads you into deserts, mountainous jungles, riverside woodlands and isolated islands in the Pacific. His quiet courage forces you to remind yourself that he's not gleaning his information from the vast list of sources in the back of this book, but from the researchers in the field. And he's right there with them as he relates their stories to him for you. Quammen writes books you want to carry around, waving at people, urging them to enjoy the superior writing and the critical message. It's all about our survival.

Quammen's resurrection of Alfred Russell Wallace was long overdue. Others have tried to bring this figure back into common knowledge, but the revival was either to accuse Darwin of plagiarism or taint Wallace's accomplishments with the flaws of penury and spiritualism. Quammen handles him as a total human being who achieved through inspiration in a delirium, what Darwin took two decades to accomplish. Quammen doesn't need to balance the two, he's more concerned with explaining the concepts in ways we can

understand.

It's Quammen's ability to make you feel you are accompanying him on his quest to see how Nature that places him far above other science writers. He understands the issues, recognizes the value of the research being done and presents the methods and events alike with unblemished clarity. As a writer concerned with the impact of humanity on the world's environment, Quammen exhibits a unique talent. While the ongoing extinction of species remains the central issue of this book, Quammen is able to show how dedicated researchers given support from concerned and caring people can begin to slow that eradication of our fellow species. Quammen's concern doesn't translate into alarmist rhetoric. He calls to us softly but urgently: "There's work to be done. There's people out there doing it. Help them how you can. They're our symbol of hope."

21 of 23 people found the following review helpful.

Dodo is not for Dodos. Quammen is superb.

By A Customer

Spring 1997. An active volcano on the Caribbean island of Montserrat forced thousands to flee the island. Britain is gripped by the worst drought in two centuries. The koala population in Australia is exploding. Brooklyn's trees are being eaten by the Asian long-horned beetle. If you see no relationship among these events, read David Quammen's superb book, "The Song of the Dodo," and learn about island biogeography, "the study of the facts and patterns of species distribution."

When most people look at animals they only see the animals--tigers, tortoises, hornbills, rhinos and so on. They never ask why an animal is the way it is or how it got that way; where it came from and what it is like. Few wonder why animals are where they are and why they're not where they're not. Quammen does, so he takes readers on an intriguing and fascinating tour of island biogeography that relates the history of famous early biologists from Charles Darwin, Alfred Russel Wallace and Joseph Hooker to biogeographers of today like Michael Soulé and Edward O. Wilson.

Quammen's bibliography is 23 pages of references in very tiny type. Fortunately, despite years spent researching Dodo, Quammen wasn't content to spend all his time reading dry academic papers and obscure texts. Instead he broke out his hiking boots and retraced the steps of some of these explorers. He describes his personal experiences colorfully with analogies, anecdotes and descriptions. If you've been to some of the places he describes, you feel like you ought to go back to see through opened eyes. If you haven't been there, you feel like you ought to go--with Quammen's book in your backpack. Here's his description of Komodo dragons being fed a goat carcass by rangers on Komodo Island in Indonesia.

"They snarf and chomp. They gorge. They thrash, they scuffle, they tug and twist. They stir up one helluva ruckus. Within a few seconds they have composed themselves at its axis; elbow to elbow, jaws locked on the meat, tails swinging, they resemble a monstrous nine-pointed starfish. Their round-snouted faces, which looked as gentle and dim as a basset hound's until just a moment ago, have gone smeary with blood. When the goat rips in half, they split into two mobs over the severed halves and the tussling continues. They have each seized a mouthful but the mouthfuls are still held together, barely, by bone and sinew. They wrestle. They lunge for new jaw-grips and clamp down, straining greedily against the tensile limits of the mangled goat.

Much of Dodo is a long tale of complex ecological concepts woven together so that those explored in the beginning are introduced again later. Quammen's observations, historical and personal, are part text, part story. Some are humorous; some are tragic. Plan to read the book at least twice. You may want to start a notebook.

Then, when you finish reading *The Song of the Dodo*, you might want to take your children to a zoo or natural history museum to show them endangered and threatened animals, birds, reptiles, amphibians insects and plants. You may want to explain that some of these species probably won't be around when their children's children--your grandchildren--are adults. Some species may become extinct in your lifetime. None will ever evolve to fill the void left by extinction. There will be no new rhinos, elephants, grizzlies, gorillas, tigers or anything else.

According to island biogeographers, what islands are good at, whether surrounded by water, farmland or urbanization, is extinction. Parks and preserves just aren't large enough. Nowhere is large enough. You are living among tomorrow's dodos. Some are within a few miles of you.

The Song of the Dodo belongs on every true environmentalist's bookshelf, alongside Aldo Leopold's "Sand County Almanac" and Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring." It should be required reading in any college course that touches on the subject of environment. Quammen, who twice won the National Magazine Award for his writing in *Outside* magazine, deserves a far more prestigious award for this book.

(This book review first appeared as an article at [...] in the Environment section.)

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