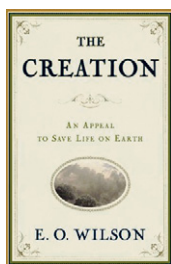


Needs more brimstone

The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth by Edward O. Wilson. W.W. Norton and Company, 2006. US\$21.95, hbk (175 pages) ISBN-13: 978 0393062175

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The recent wave of creationist activity in the USA has provoked a flurry of critical commentary in popular science books. E.O. Wilson's contribution, *The Creation*, is unique in that it proposes to set aside the timeless creation–evolution dispute and encourage conservative evangelicals to join in the desperately pressing effort to save biodiversity.

Wilson draws on his upbringing as a born-again evangelical in Alabama, addressing the opening and concluding chapters to an imaginary Southern Baptist minister who is a biblical literalist and a young-Earth creationist. Wilson leads the minister on a tour of conservation biology, including its moral and economic justifications, its emotional bases in biophilia (the idea that a love of nature is embedded in human instincts), the scientific outlines of the current biodiversity crisis, and the educational and sociopolitical avenues that will hopefully ameliorate the crisis.

Wilson's fundamental premise, that scientists should reach out to evangelicals on political issues, is sound. Whether you like it or not, American evangelicals are one of the most politically powerful groups on the planet. For instance, the ratification of any international treaty can be blocked by 34 votes in the US Senate and, as Wilson notes with irritation, the USA has refused to join the 188 nations that have ratified the Convention on Biological Diversity. Wilson errs slightly when he says that the USA has not signed the treaty; President Clinton signed it in 1993, but in 1994, Senate Republicans blocked a vote on ratification under pressure from conservative business groups. As long as evangelicals join in an unholy alliance with anti-conservation businesses, such resistance will continue.

Appealing to evangelicals is therefore a good idea but, unfortunately, *The Creation* is weak in its implementation. As a veteran creationism fighter, I have read more than a little material by and about evangelicals, and I can state with some confidence that *The Creation* contains several features that undermine the stated goal of communication with evangelicals. When asked, evangelicals express several specific concerns about conservationism [1]. To them, it sometimes appears to cross over into nature worship; it sometimes appears to privilege animals over people; and it sometimes appears to be another 'liberal' issue that produces national or international bureaucracies that intrude on private property and economic progress. Mainstream

conservationists such as Wilson would undoubtedly reply, and rightfully so, that these concerns do not apply to the kind of responsible conservation movement promoted in *The Creation*. But a truly effective appeal would specifically address evangelicals' typical concerns.

Another problem: Wilson proposes to set aside the disputes surrounding evolution and God, but he has trouble doing it himself. Many of the chapters contain only a perfunctory salute to the minister, and then continue with a standard exposition of Wilson's views. Rather than developing a rationale for conservation that is independent of evolution, Wilson constantly relies upon it. He even goes so far as to embed his argument for conservation within his larger argument that religious belief is a byproduct of evolution, complete with the implication that the modern Judeo-Christian God is just another imaginary deity of ancient desert tribes.

Wilson does much better when he is in his element. *The Creation* soars in the sections on ants, on the author's adventures studying ants and on educating the next generation of nature lovers. For readers who are not religious conservatives, it serves as an inspirational introductory work on the science and importance of conservation, and a springboard to Wilson's many other works. Although minor oversights can be found; for example, Wilson's friend Gerard Piel bought *Scientific American*, but did not found it (it was founded in 1845), and bacteria have a flagellum, rather than a cilium, they are not distracting.

If conservationists are serious about making their case to evangelicals, they should have the goal of getting biodiversity on the front cover of *Christianity Today*, the leading evangelical newsmagazine. Wilson's book will not do it, but at least he is thinking in the right direction. The key is convincing evangelicals that extinction is a moral outrage, something at least as senseless and horrible as book burning. Extinction should be viewed as stealing from future generations. Aldo Leopold knew this; he once sarcastically invited a wildflower thief to steal the paintings from the campus union while he was at it [2]. Whether a believer or not, 'thou shalt not steal' is a good commandment.

References

- 1 Van Houtan, K.S. and Pimm, S.L. (2006) The various Christian ethics of species conservation. In *Religion and the New Ecology* (Lodge, D.M. and Hamlin, C., eds), pp. 116–147, University of Notre Dame Press
- 2 Leopold, A. (1991) Letter to a wildflower digger [1938]. In *The River of the Mother of God and Other Essays* (Flader, S.L. and Callicott, J.B., eds), pp. 247–248, University of Wisconsin Press