

# WILDEARTH



WINTER 1999/2000

*Vision*

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# Around the Campfire

by Dave Foreman



## The Pleistocene-Holocene Event: Forty Thousand Years of Extinction

**I**N 1996, 1500 LEADING SCIENTISTS FROM 80 COUNTRIES PUBLISHED A comprehensive report on extinction:

*During the past 400 years, some 486 animal and 654 plant species are recorded as having gone extinct...a rate about 1,000 times greater than the [average] rate of extinction.*

Moreover, they noted:

*No biologist has documented the extinction of a continental species of plant or animal caused by non-human agencies....<sup>1</sup>*

The first extinctions caused by the European Age of Exploration occurred about four hundred years ago (1600 AD). Spain, Portugal, France, England, Holland, and other European countries were discovering continents and islands to the farthest corners of the world. Today's mass extinction event began with European exploration, exploitation, and colonization—or so the argument goes.

But does this common belief hold up under scrutiny? Just as it is hard to focus on something right before your nose, so is it difficult to clearly see your age in history—much less in geology. To bring such a fuzzy view into sharpness, we must step back a tad. Drawing back also allows us to put the object of our gaze into a larger scene. By being so close to the modern horror of extinction, we hold a fuzzy view—thus we see today's extinction crisis beginning in 1600. If, however, we refocus to see a wider slice of time, we ken a truer picture of extinction.

*continues on page 2*

1. Stolzenburg, William, "Extinction-For The Record," *Nature Conservancy* May/June 1996, p. 6.

The opinions expressed in Campfire are my own, and do not necessarily reflect official policy of The Wildlands Project or *Wild Earth*. —DF

## About Wild Earth and The Wildlands Project



**Wild Earth** is a quarterly journal melding conservation biology and wildlands activism. Our efforts to strengthen the conservation movement involve the following:

- We serve as the publishing wing of The Wildlands Project.
- We provide a forum for the many effective but little-known regional wilderness groups and coalitions in North America, and serve as a networking tool for wilderness activists.
- We make the teachings of conservation biology accessible to non-scientists, that activists may employ them in defense of biodiversity.
- We expose threats to habitat and wildlife.
- We facilitate discussion on ways to end and reverse the human population explosion.
- We defend wilderness both as concept and as place.



**The Wildlands Project** is the organization guiding the design of a continental wilderness recovery strategy. Through advocacy, education, scientific consultation, and cooperation with many regional groups, The Wildlands Project is drafting a blueprint for an interconnected, continental-scale system of protected wildlands linked by habitat corridors.

*Wild Earth* and The Wildlands Project are closely allied but independent nonprofit organizations dedicated to the restoration and protection of wilderness and biodiversity. We share a vision of an ecologically healthy North America—with adequate habitat for all native species, containing vibrant human and natural communities.

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"A Feeling of Moab," mixed  
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## Around the Campfire *continued*

The Hawaiian Islands are a poster child for extinctions caused by European contact—between 18 and 30 species of endemic birds have become extinct in the last 200 years.<sup>2</sup> But recent research by avian paleontologists Helen James and Storrs Olson of the Smithsonian Institution shows that most bird extinctions in Hawaii did not occur after Captain Cook became the first European to visit in 1778, but after the first Polynesians arrived in 400 AD. Their research has “unearthed at least 50 previously unknown species of birds which went extinct” before Cook, including a close relative of the bald eagle, an accipiter hawk, three species of long-legged owls, four flightless geese, three flightless ibises, and 15 Hawaiian honeycreepers (a group unique to Hawaii).<sup>3</sup>

If we shake off today's blinders and ponder carefully the historical, biological, and fossil records, we must conclude that the current extinction crisis did not begin only 400 years ago, and it has not been caused solely by colonial and then industrial European empires. Today's extinction crisis—the end of the Pleistocene, in Michael Soulé's words—has been going on for 40,000 years, and, though caused by humans, it is not only modern, European society that has wreaked ecological havoc. Indeed, it has only been in the last few decades that industrial civilization has rivaled Stone Age cultures in the number of species exterminated. Ever since modern humans began to spread into hitherto unoccupied parts of the world beginning some time before 40,000 years ago, a single mass extinction has been underway.

During these forty millennia, human beings have wrought a revolution in the diversity of life. Duke University's John Terborgh, who, along with Soulé, was

## It has only been in the last few decades that industrial civilization to spread into hitherto unoccupied parts of the world beginning

selected by *Audubon* magazine as one of the 100 greatest conservationists of the century, has looked at the loss of big animals in North America and concludes,

*That we should live in a world without megafauna is an extreme aberration. It is a condition that has not existed for the last 250 million years of evolutionary history....*

*To add perspective to the above, let us reflect on the fact that the entire eastern half of the North American continent south of the North Woods supports only one ungulate, the white-tailed deer...eastern North America is unique: all other continental mammal assemblages include a number of ungulates, frequently a half-dozen species or more.<sup>4</sup>*

2. Pimm, Stuart L., Gareth J. Russell, John L. Gittleman, and Thomas M. Brooks, “The Future of Biodiversity,” *Science* Vol. 269, 21 July 1995, p. 348.
3. Haupt, Lyanda, “Feathers and Fossils: Hawaiian Extinctions and Modern Conservation,” *Wild Earth* Spring 1996, pp. 44–49.
4. Terborgh, John, “Top-down or Bottom-up, What Does It Matter?” unpublished draft in author's files. Large animals or megafauna are 100 pounds (45 kg) or larger.

