

# DISAPPEARING WORLD

Elizabeth Kolbert's *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History*

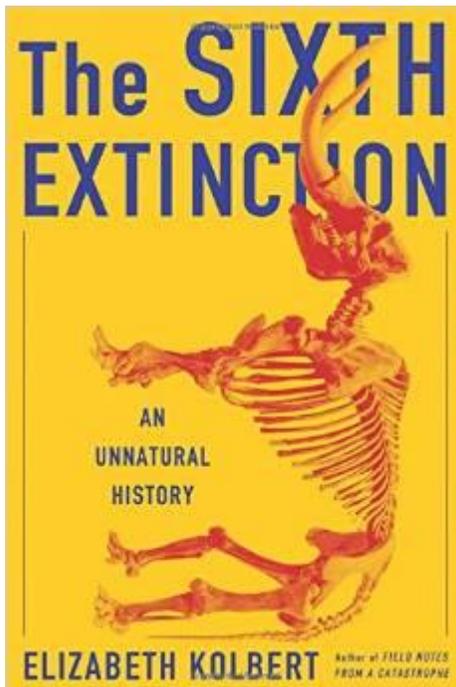
A Review by Alexis Greene

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June 2014, and my vegetable garden is in decline. A rainy, cold, mostly sunless spring has sent night temperatures plummeting, and my tomato plants are shaking their heads, saying “No way.”

Even if all were thriving and putting out blossoms, there would be few fauna around to pollinate them. Bumblebees have been scarce on my Walton, NY, hilltop, and where my shed was once home to numerous little brown bats, now it is a residence for squirrels and the occasional nosy porcupine. The bats, excellent pollinators, have succumbed to white-nose syndrome, a fungus that has killed them off in New York and New England, and spread South, West and to Canada.

My garden's spring breakdown would be immediately recognizable to Elizabeth Kolbert, whose new book, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (Henry Holt and Company), is an illuminating account of how we humans continue to destroy our planet's oceans and atmosphere, plants and animals, setting the stage for potentially eradicating the most precious animal of all – ourselves.



There have been five major extinctions during the past half-billion years of life on Earth, caused by colliding asteroids and climate upheavals (the demise of the dinosaurs, around the fifty million mark, is probably the most famous). Kolbert, along with numerous respected scientists, believes we are in the midst of the sixth.

An environmental journalist and staff writer for *The New Yorker*, Kolbert has dedicated herself to raising a red flag about climate change. But *Sixth Extinction* is not only about human-caused global warming, although that figures large in her discussions of rising CO<sup>2</sup> levels in the seas around us.

This wide-ranging book—a kind of “unnatural” adventure in thirteen meticulous chapters—also laments other ways in which we humans have eradicated flora and fauna. From the start of what the Dutch Nobel Prize-winning chemist Paul Crutzen calls the “Anthropocene” epoch (in his view, beginning 11,000 or more years ago), humans have razed forests and built up cities, so that many species do not have enough space in which to

thrive. We poach our largest mammals into oblivion and carelessly send invasive species and murderous bacteria around the world.

The fungus that killed off the little brown bats, Kolbert writes, was most likely “accidentally imported from Europe.” Locally, the fungus possibly migrated from one of the 200,000 tourists that annually traipse through Howe Caverns, in nearby Schoharie County. “Without human help,” she comments sardonically, “long-distance travel is for most species difficult, bordering on impossible.”

Kolbert smoothly integrates scientific history and contemporary research with first-hand observation. Traveling to Iceland, she connects with a fisherman who takes her to the base of a towering rock called Eldey Island, where the Great Auk made its last stand in 1844. On One Tree Island, at the southernmost tip of the Great Barrier Reef, Kolbert observes reef-building coral, which has declined there by fifty percent in just the past thirty years. She joins up in Peru with a forest ecologist who studies global warming’s impact on a tropical forest.

The effect of Kolbert’s wide-ranging approach is to demonstrate how global our predicament really is, and why it’s human-made. The auks vanished because they were easy dinner for seafarers and did not breed fast enough to survive their decimation – a biological challenge currently facing elephants in Africa and rhinos in southeast Asia. Coral reefs are dying because we humans burn too much fossil fuel, sending high levels of CO<sup>2</sup> into the atmosphere which is absorbed by the oceans, now thirty percent more acidic than they were two hundred years ago. Ultimately, coral will no longer grow, or calcify, in that acidic environment, and the intricate reef ecosystem - including fish that appear in our supermarkets – will vanish as well.

Kolbert writes in a more laid-back style than she usually displays in *The New Yorker*, where parts of chapters of this book first appeared. Perhaps that’s why the book lacks the fervor and urgency of Rachel Carson’s revolutionary *Silent Spring*, to which *The Sixth Extinction* has been compared. Carson’s 1962 exposé of the perils of synthetic pesticides sent an easily grasped, forceful message: DDT means death for birds, fish and animals - including humans. But as Kolbert herself recognizes, concepts such as mass extinction, climate change and global warming are hard to personalize and thus tough for the public to absorb.

Which brings me back to my Walton vegetable garden. Bumblebees eventually did appear, thanks to Michelle Suozzo of Franklin’s Meadowbrook Farm, who suggested I buy Spicy Lime Basil plants and let them flower. Bees, it turns out, can’t get enough of the stuff.

But the little brown bats seem to be gone for good, while Japanese beetles arrived in hordes - pests, Kolbert writes, that first appeared in the U.S. in 1916, in New Jersey.

Kolbert provides no solutions to the potential mass extinction she believes we have set in motion. She leaves us on notice that human beings now have an evolutionary choice: we can continue to abuse the natural world around us, potentially leading, centuries hence, to our own extinction. Or we can take any measures still available to lower our carbon output, preserve wildlife and protect the oceans and forests on which we depend for survival.

The choice is ours.

*Alexis Greene is an author and editor. She lives in Walton, NY and New York City with her husband, Gordon R. Hough.*