

E. O. Wilson: We must save the living environment

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- Saving Earth's biodiversity will take nothing less than an IPCC for species, says the world's leading biologist and ant guru.*

What's this idea all about?

It sounds immodest but I call it Wilson's law. It says that if you save the living environment, you will automatically save the physical environment. But if you only try to save the physical environment, you will lose them both. That is a defensible law.

So we need a major rethink?

When we talk about the world going green, the media and the public think of pollution or fresh-water shortage. They understand, and want to do something. But that is the physical world; concern for the living environment has been slow to take off, as Julia Marton-Lefèvre, head of the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN), will agree. We are not making the headway we should be in preventing the destruction of ecosystems and species. I have written book after book arguing that if we don't start caring about holding onto them, we will have big problems - some unforeseeable. Most Americans have only the vaguest notion about any of that, even though they can talk intelligently about climate change. Yet when it comes to the living world they are in danger of losing something they scarcely understand.

What are these people missing out on?

People see nature as trees, plants and vertebrates. Yet the world is run by little creatures most people have not heard of; 99 per cent of Earth's organisms are extremely small. For example, some of the most abundant and crucial land animals are the tiny oribatid mites, which are the size of a pinhead and look like a cross between a turtle and a spider. They are a linchpin organism of the environment, but 20 years ago when I set out to identify them no one had heard of them. Back then there were just two people in the US able to identify them. Fortunately one agreed to work with me. Yet we still don't know what the vast majority of oribatids do.

Do you have a plan for what we should do?

I am working on a joint proposal with Simon Stuart, head of the Species Survival Commission at the IUCN. I want to set up an effort along the lines of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change to protect species. The panel has had huge success marshalling global science to address climate change, providing models and the evidence to show climate change is happening, and that it is due to human activity. But it is still all about the physical world.

This sounds like a natural fit with your other big project, the Encyclopedia of Life

Yes, it is. In 2003, I suggested we set up an electronic encyclopedia to register everything

known about the 1.8 million or so species on Earth. People thought it would be a wonderful base from which to find out about millions of species we don't know about. We ended up with \$30 million, and the [EoL](#) went live in February 2008. Now, if we can have a partnership between the EoL, the IUCN and other key conservation organisations, we would soon be able to make much more "surgical" recommendations about conserving species.

Profile

E. O. Wilson is Pellegrino University Research Professor at Harvard University. His latest book, with Bert Hölldobler, is *The Superorganism: The beauty, elegance, and strangeness of insect societies* (W. W. Norton, 2008)