

"We have ample evidence that Earth is headed for disaster, and for the first time in history we have the ability to prevent that disaster from wiping us out," Newitz writes. "Whether the disaster is caused by humans or by nature, it is inevitable. But our doom is not." She explains that major asteroid strikes are expected to occur roughly every 100,000 years, which means "we are long overdue for another one." She gives the impression not that we are destroying ourselves, but rather that we have gotten away with something. To Newitz, humans are exceptional not for the destruction we've caused—after all, climate change and mass extinction have numerous precedents—but

If we are destined to destroy as the dark side of our creativity, why try to avert catastrophe?

for our unique ability to ultimately outfox the forces of global calamity.

Newitz proposes ideas to both mitigate human damage to the environment and prepare for the eventuality of catastrophe. Her suggestions range from the familiar green-agenda items (urban agriculture) to promising but unrealized techno-fixes (algae as an energy source and carbon suck) to more controversial proposals such as geo-engineering. She also advances some goals that are, depending on your perspective, either visionary or outlandish: building underground cities and colonizing other planets.

Newitz's approach—her eschewal of dogma, her sunny confidence—might engage those who are put off by guilt trips and sermons. Indeed, a recent social science study found that raising the possibility of geo-engineering with conservatives seemed to "offset cultural polarization" and made the study's subjects more concerned about climate change. (The advisability of geo-engineering is another question.) Not everyone, though, will share her enthusiasm for a future of riding space elevators and uploading our brains into computer software. "Don't worry," she concludes on her book's final page. "As long as we keep exploring, humanity is going to survive."

For the first Earth Day, in 1970, the cartoonist Walt Kelly produced an iconic poster that declared, "We have met the enemy and he is us." It's a longstanding green sentiment, revived today by the *New Yorker* staff writer Eliza-

beth Kolbert. At the end of her book *The Sixth Extinction*, Kolbert quotes the upbeat send-off of Newitz's book (identifying the source only in an endnote) and then offers a curt retort: "at the risk of sounding anti-human—some of my best friends are humans!—I will say that [human survival] is not, in the end, what's most worth attending to."

Newitz and Kolbert cover a striking amount of the same material, from the history of mass extinctions to the relationship of *Homo sapiens* with the Neanderthals. But for two advocates on the same fundamental side of the climate debate, their tones and values could hardly be more antithetical.

Where Newitz praises humanity's ability to scatter and adapt, Kolbert trains her focus on the countless victims of that enterprise.

Thoroughly researched and elegantly written, with the occasional touch of dry

humor, *The Sixth Extinction* is an ambitious addition to Kolbert's oeuvre. Her previous volume, *Field Notes From a Catastrophe*, published after serialization in *The New Yorker*, brought the perils of global warming to the attention of a large audience. In her new book, Kolbert tags along with scientists from all over the world and delivers dispatches on their findings. The news—whether about the fate of coral reefs, frogs or bats—is not good. She leaves no doubt about this, frequently ending sections with portentous quotes. "The extinction scenario," one scientist tells her, "well, it starts to look apocalyptic." At the end of another section, she quotes the journal *Oceanography* to the effect that if we continue along our current path, it is likely to lead to "one of the most notable, if not cataclysmic, events in the history of our planet."

Both Kolbert and Newitz address the question of what makes our species special, and they more or less agree on the answer: the drive to explore and the ability to alter our surroundings. But rather than see this as cause for celebration or awe, Kolbert views it above all as a pox on our fellow earthlings. Her work epitomizes one classic subgenre of environmentalist writing: the catalog of human crimes against nature. In fact, compared with other members of this subgenre, such as *Silent Spring* and Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature*, *The Sixth Extinction* is on the extreme end of pessimism, declining to prescribe or even exhort. The philosophical thrust is to debunk any romantic notion of an Edenic past in which noble savages frolicked

peaceably among the flora and fauna. For example, Kolbert notes an ascendant theory that holds humans responsible for the extinction of megafauna such as mammoths millennia ago—an annihilation that led to a string of other ecological changes. "Though it might be nice to imagine there once was a time when man lived in harmony with nature," she writes, "it's not clear that he ever really did."

To Kolbert, humankind is essentially destructive. "With the capacity to represent the world in signs and symbols comes the capacity to change it, which, as it happens, is also the capacity to destroy it," she notes, continuing:

To argue that the current extinction event could be averted if people just cared more and were willing to make more sacrifices is not wrong, exactly; still, it misses the point. It doesn't much matter whether people care or don't care. What matters is that people change the world.... If you want to think about why humans are so dangerous to other species, you can picture a poacher in Africa carrying an AK-47 or a logger in the Amazon gripping an ax, or, better still, you can picture yourself, holding a book on your lap.

With this last phrase, Kolbert implicates both the reader and herself and reveals the tension at the heart of her work. She is devoted to documenting environmental devastation, clearly convinced that this effort has value; but her inquiry has led her to the conclusion that even her own project—which, after all, involved plane travel and tree pulp—is part of the problem.

All of this is true, as far as it goes. But as rhetoric, it has its limitations: this very fatalism, in a sense, lets humans off too easily. If we are destined to destroy as the dark side of our creativity, why bother trying to avert catastrophe? If we are an innately destructive force, trying to save the planet from ourselves is more pointless than trying to intercept an asteroid.

Longtime environmental writer and activist Bill McKibben is likely sympathetic to aspects of Kolbert's worldview. Her despondency about human violence to the planet resonates with much of his work. But McKibben has recently hit upon a new way of framing the issue of climate change: demonizing a subset of bad guys—that is, identifying a "them." In a 2012 *Rolling Stone* article called "Global Warming's Terrifying New