
❖❖ COLLOQUY ❖❖

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Colloquy will be published as often as circumstances allow and submissions warrant. Contributions are welcome at any time in the Associate Provost's Office. Texts provided on disks in Word Perfect are greatly appreciated. Please contact Kay Crawford X6679 for further information.

Evolution, Extinction, and the Pending Environmental Crisis

Co-Coordinator: Aldemaro Romero (Environmental Studies and Biology)
and Raymond Rogers (Geology)

Participants in this seminar included Richard Dunn, Jeffrey Evans, Diane Glancy, Daniel Kaplan, Richard Molnar, Mary Montgomery, Brett Smith, James Straka, Peter Vaughan.

The Wallace Faculty Seminar entitled Evolution, Extinction, and the Pending Environmental Crisis was convened ten times during the 1999 - 2000 academic year. Seminar participants included 11 faculty from seven different departments/programs - Biology, Mathematics and Computer Science, English, Geology, Economics, International Studies, and Environmental Studies. The seminar format was essentially open discussion driven by selected readings that ranged from research reports in technical journals to popular accounts in magazines and books.

The main purpose of the Seminar was to find common themes among the issues of evolution, extinction and environmental problems. One obvious difficulty to be overcome was to understand that while we see environmental issues as a present-day problem whose time scale can be measured in few years, evolutionary notions are usually expressed in a scale of millions of years.

A bridge between both issues is provided by the phenomenon of extinction. Although extinction has been a common phenomenon in the evolutionary history of our planet, there is little doubt that humans have accelerated such a process in the last hundreds of years.

The seminar opened with a discussion on the Red Queen Hypothesis which seem to be applicable to both, extinctions at great scale in the past as well as those of anthropogenic nature.

The discussions continued with reading from *The Beak of the Finch*, a book written by Jonathan Weiner. This book provided a foundation for the exploration of biotic evolution, in that it detailed the evidence among the finches of the Galapagos for natural selection in an unpredictable and often harsh environment. There was general agreement among participants that this book was an exceptional introduction to the scientific evidence for evolution.

Another topic explored in the seminar was extinction caused by humans moving into new continents in what has been labeled as neoextinctions. To that end we read selected chapters of the book *The Ecological Indian, Myth and History*, by Shepard Krech that further provides arguments against the notion of the "ecologically-noble savage." We discussed the loss of species in modern ecosystems (e.g., the loss of native species in grasslands of the American West). With regard to the fossil record, the seminar discussed the five major mass extinctions in the history of life and their potential causes. Biotic recovery after mass extinction was also explored, and it was unanimously agreed that the ten-million-year biotic recovery times suggested by the fossil record are troubling to say the least.

We also discussed a paper on Stephen J. Gould and how many of his writings have been used by creationists to back-up their claims of the impossibility of evolution. The seminar continued with readings that explored aspects of human culture and society and their potential impacts on degradation and extinction in the biosphere.

The final reading was selected chapters of the book *Rare Earth, Why Complex Life Is Uncommon in the Universe*, by Peter D. Ward and Donald Brownlee. This book's main line argument is that conditions on earth are very unique and, thus, life as we know it, must also be unique to our planet. Although highly speculative, the book served as a source for discussion about competing hypotheses on astrobiology.

This was a very interesting seminar where people from the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities were able to participate by exchanging views nurtured in diverse disciplines.