

How robust must the Earth's ecosystems be to assure our continued existence? Can we know, or should we ask, which other species are essential to our survival? How might we arrive at a stable, optimum population, and design economies that allow genuine prosperity without endless growth?

Weisman launches his book with two intriguing quotes. The first is from the *New Testament*: "This calls for wisdom. If anyone has insight, let him calculate the number of the beast, for it is man's number." This allusion to Biblical reason, and harmony between humans and nature is followed by a flat injunction from the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei in 1989: "When wisdom dictates that you do not need more children, a vasectomy is permissible."

As he did in *The World Without Us*, Weisman takes us with him to deserts and forests, to high-tech offices where the next Green Revolution is being plotted, and to debates on optimum population in church crypts under the busy streets of London. In India, Italy, Japan, in Niger, Mexico, Uganda and Palestine, Weisman initiates candid conversations with religious leaders, public health experts, scientists, and people passionate about bird migration. Some people tell him that "we cannot hold back doomsday." Others drive home the connections between

family-planning, wildlife protection, and eco-tourism. Some point a finger at money addiction and capitalism as problems that must be solved to crack the population code, others say that human ingenuity and technological fixes will always save the day.

Weisman writes lucidly, his reportage a narrative that will sweep along readers usually indifferent to non-fiction. Ultimately, having wrestled with the numbers and the stories, Weisman arrives at some core truths, among them, that not just slowing but reducing the global population is a pre-requisite for achieving a liveable and sustainable future. He analyses the methods for reducing our numbers, and without giving too much away, because I urge you to read this book, he concludes that access to education and family planning for women all over the world can achieve an equilibrium that we and the rest of life can live with. Technological innovation alone will never erase the havoc our species is wreaking upon the Earth, says Weisman. Our technological smarts must be harnessed to a deeper wisdom, of ourselves as an intrinsic part of nature, beholden to and dependent on it, if we are to secure our future and the future of our collective home.

Reviewed by Jennifer Scarlott

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