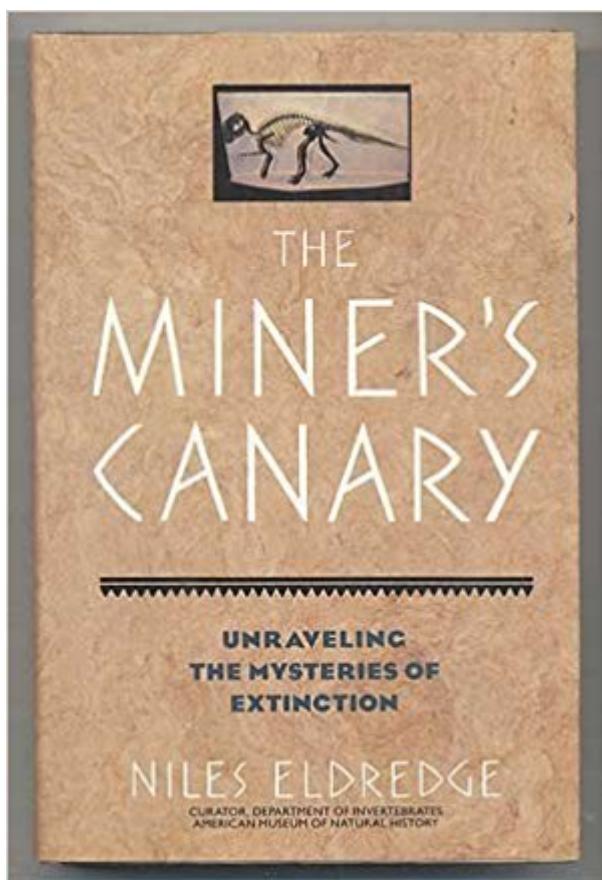


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The Miner's Canary: Unraveling The Mysteries Of Extinction



Synopsis

Like the bird whose death signaled dangerous conditions in a mine, the demise of animals that once flourished should give humans pause. How is our fate linked to the earth's creatures, and the cycle of flourishing and extinction? Which are the simple workings of nature's order, and which are omens of ecological disaster? Does human activity accelerate extinction? What really causes it? In an illuminating and elegantly written account of the widespread reduction of the world's wildlife, renowned paleontologist Niles Eldredge poses these questions and examines humankind's role in the larger life cycles of the earth, composing a provocative general theory of extinction. --This text refers to the Paperback edition.

Book Information

Hardcover: 246 pages

Publisher: Prentice Hall Trade; 1st edition (October 1991)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 013583659X

ISBN-13: 978-0135836590

Product Dimensions: 1 x 6 x 8.6 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 3.0 out of 5 stars 1 customer review

Best Sellers Rank: #5,115,162 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #93 in Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Paleontology > Paleobiology #3844 in Books > Textbooks > Science & Mathematics > Biology & Life Sciences > Ecology #12486 in Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Ecology

Customer Reviews

Eldredge, curator and chairman of the department of invertebrates at New York City's American Museum of Natural History, surveys the last 670 million years, examining factors that cause extinction without human intervention and, later, the effects of human action. Offering a theory that links the distant past to the present, he observes that most mass extinctions occurred slowly over a very long period (up to five million years); he points out that by the time dinosaurs vanished forever, most of their species had already become extinct. Noting that the move to agriculture signaled the destruction of animal habitats, Eldredge concludes that change of size and location of habitat underlies most instances of extinction, from isolated species disappearances to mass extinction. In the matter of ecosystem degradation, he maintains, it is our existence that is at stake. A stimulating

and persuasive argument. Science Book Club and Library of Science Book Club alternates.

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Because of their sensitivity to dangerous gases, canaries were once kept in mines to warn miners of potential disaster. In this book, paleontologist Eldredge, author of *Life Pulse* (LJ 2/1/87) and other books dealing with evolution and the history of life, notes that the decline of migrating songbirds may likewise signal catastrophe, but on a global scale. He reviews the evidence for extinction and its causes, primarily using fossil evidence and focusing on climatic change and loss of habitat. This book is aimed at the same interested lay readers as David Raup's *Extinction* (LJ 8/91), but differs in its focus and its more wide-ranging discussion. If forced to choose between the two, pick this one.- Joseph Hannibal, Cleveland Museum of Natural HistoryCopyright 1991 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This is a reasonable book for someone who knows nothing about the history of extinctions, or evolution and historical geology, in general. Eldredge takes great pains to describe the phenomenon of extinction (background and mass) in the most popular terms possible. He also tries to inject some humanity into his narrative by introducing ideas and their originators at the same time. This is a game effort, but the scientists never really become more than names to the reader. One of Eldredge's goals is to introduce the absolutely uninitiated to the idea that *Homo sapiens* is not responsible for most extinctions in Earth history. For readers still hazy about the fact that our genus is only about 3.5 million years old and that life has been around for at least 3.5 billion years, this is a good lesson to pound across. For everyone else it will seem like a dogged repetition of the obvious. When one finished reading this book extinction will definitely be a lot less mysterious, but I don't think it will have been made much more interesting.

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