Paradise Lost

A study of what happened after man's expulsion from the garden.

Paul Raeburn

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THE ECOLOGY OF EDEN

By Evan Eisenberg.
612 pp. New York:
Alfred A. Knopf. $30.

Imagine gazing across a jagged landscape where coils of steam hiss from the ground, hundreds of creatures gather at watering holes and fierce competition determines rank. Depending on whether the steam rises from geothermal vents or manhole covers, this place could be either Yellowstone National Park or Times Square. Yet one represents wilderness, the other civilization, and that dichotomy is the subject of "The Ecology of Eden," a broad rumination by Evan Eisenberg on the fragile state of the earth's natural environment and what might be done to protect it. In this ambitious work, Eisenberg tries to step beyond old arguments, in which civilization and wilderness always seem to be at odds. He argues that the health of planet Earth depends on the health of both: "The human condition is (among other things) the state of trying to keep one's balance on the shifting soil between these two domains. That balancing act is what this book is about."

His story begins with humanity's expulsion from Eden. But it is not about the ecology of Eden; it's about the ecology of what humans were stuck with after being thrown out. Denied Eden's riches and forced to earn a living, humans spread across the globe, building civilizations and mostly ignoring the seemingly endless wilderness. As Eisenberg notes, that was a mistake. Wilderness frightened our ancestors — but it was also what kept them alive. "Taking over the world is something like taking over a company," he writes. "Either you leave most of the workers in place, or you replace them with others who can get the job done." In the takeover of the world, the "jobs in question are ecological services — the cycling of water and nutrients; the flow of energy; the dispersal of pollen, seeds and other propagules; the regulation of climate; the balancing of gases in the air — without which most creatures on earth ... would perish." During the last 10,000 years, "we have gutted the buildings, fired the employees, sold off the assets," and "the shiny new equipment we have brought in" cannot be trusted to supplant ecological services provided by nature. "By the time we know for sure what the effects are, it will be too late to do much about them."

In the first of the book's four sections, Eisenberg describes changes that have swept over the earth since that expulsion from Eden. He begins with the passage of human ancestors from forests to grasslands and discusses the emergence of agriculture. Then he seems to ricochet all over the place. One minute he talks about the evolutionary origin of cells, then the destruction of topsoil, then the release of starlings in Central Park by a misguided Shakespeare buff who wanted North America to have every species of bird mentioned in the playwright's works.

Eisenberg tries to summarize the current environmental crisis quickly before moving on to a search for a way out of it, a search that occupies most of the book. However,

his analysis of the problem relies on poorly chosen examples that don't add up to very much. In recent years, researchers have tried to document rates of species extinction, to show how and where natural habitat is being lost, to monitor pollution and to assess other environmental threats. Inclusion of some of that research would have given strength and currency to Eisenberg's case, but he largely ignores it.

In part two, he takes a long detour through mythology, asking "what ecological facts the myths reflect, cover up or help create." It's an intriguing idea: Perhaps literature and mythology will reveal important insights that haven't been reflected in science. In part three, Eisenberg roams through human history for clues. And in part four, he uses what he has learned to suggest answers to current environmental problems.

I would like to report what he learned, but I am still reeling from one of the most impressive uses of metaphor I have seen. Nowhere does Eisenberg use a simple, descriptive phrase where a metaphor will suffice. Wilderness and civilization become "The Mountain" and "The Tower." "The World Mountain is mythic shorthand for an ecological fact. There are certain places on earth that ... are spigots for the circulation of wildness through places made hard and almost impermeable by long human use." In one breath, Eisenberg describes the Central Park starlings as "winged mice ... airborne rats, or great speckled bees ... leaving a white and malodorous honey behind." Discussing the value of hedgerows and windbreaks as migratory pathways for wildlife, he says "such corridors would turn the walled garden inside out so that, like a Klein bottle, it would contain the universe."

One of the lessons Eisenberg says he learned from mythology and history is that we should collaborate with nature, not fight it. He calls that collaboration "Earth Jazz," and it goes like this: "A good model for the planet might be a bebop quartet led by a saxophonist... If you translate time into space, the sax player into humankind, and the three sidemen into other taxa — making the piano, say, the nonhuman animals, the bass the plants, the drum set a catchall for fungi, protoctists and bacteria — you get a lesson in how humans can work with nature." Translation: The hills are alive — with the sound of music.

At one point he compares nature to the economy, observing that nature is guided by an invisible hand that "sometimes makes a hash of things." But he does not address the serious issue of how commerce and the economy impinge on the environment. Maybe the explanation for the PCB's at the bottom of the Hudson River has less to do with The Mountain and The Tower than with General Electric's unwillingness to pay for the cleanup.

He neatly dismisses most environmentalists as either "deep ecologists" or "planet managers." Deep ecologists hold that "humans have no right to a larger role in nature than raccoons." Planet managers "are the crazed futurists, the sort of people who would make cows legless milk-dispensers, conveniently stackable." One might have hoped for more insightful descriptions.

Eisenberg does have a serious point to make, and it has something to do with collaboration with nature. Without thriving cities, he argues, "the tide of human population

must soon overwhelm whatever wilderness is left." That's a useful observation, but he takes it too far. "Cities are natural. Even their unnaturalness is natural, for it springs from our nature." Times Square, in other words, is as natural as Yellowstone? Send in the clowns.

Paul Raeburn, a senior editor at Business Week, is the author of "The Last Harvest" and a forthcoming book on Mars.

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