

New book reveals how nature is fighting back

July 6 2017



Credit: University of York

A University of York academic has written a new book that challenges us to look positively at the impact of humans on the natural world.

In *Inheritors of the Earth*, ecologist and environmentalist Professor Chris Thomas, overturns the accepted story of declining biodiversity on Earth, revealing how nature is fighting back.

In the book, Professor Thomas argues that many animals and plants

actually benefit from our presence, raising [biological diversity](#) in most parts of the world and increasing the rate at which [new species](#) are formed, perhaps to the highest level in Earth's history.

From Costa Rican tropical forests to the thoroughly transformed British landscape, nature is coping surprisingly well in the human epoch, Professor Thomas says.

He argues that the fauna and flora of Britain are much richer today than 10,000 years ago as a result of farming, towns, gardening, climate change and the deliberate introduction of exotic [species](#).

Diversity

In Britain, the effects can be seen with the humble sparrow. Sparrows are not native to our country but spread from central Asia with people. In Italy they hybridised with Spanish sparrows to produce a new true-breeding species. Once in decline, they are now protected and encouraged in Britain.

In the book, Professor Thomas takes us on a gripping round-the-world journey to meet the enterprising creatures that are thriving in the Anthropocene, from York's ochre-coloured comma butterfly to hybrid bison in North America, scarlet-beaked pukekos in New Zealand, and Asian palms forming thickets in the European Alps.

In so doing, he questions our irrational persecution of so-called 'invasive species', arguing that they are simply successful species, well suited to the human-altered world.

Professor Thomas, from the University's Department of Biology, said: "Life on Earth is a process, not a faded masterpiece that needs to be restored to a past state that no longer exists.

"Like others, I am concerned about the extinction of the world's species, but it is equally valid for us to appreciate the increases in diversity that have already taken place in the human epoch.

"This enables us to champion a more optimistic, forward-looking approach to conservation whereby we appreciate biological gains as much as we regret the losses."

Ruthlessly argued

Combining a naturalist's eye for wildlife with an ecologist's wide lens, Professor Thomas forces us to re-examine humanity's relationship with nature, and reminds us that the story of life is the story of change.

Matt Ridley, writing in *The Times*, said: "An immensely significant book. It is fluently written, carefully thought through, ruthlessly argued, neatly illustrated with case studies - and shockingly contrarian."

More information: *Inheritors of the Earth: How Nature Is Thriving in an Age of Extinction*, by Chris D Thomas, is published 6th July 2017 by Allen Lane (Penguin)

Provided by University of York

Citation: New book reveals how nature is fighting back (2017, July 6) retrieved 19 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2017-07-reveals-nature.html>

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