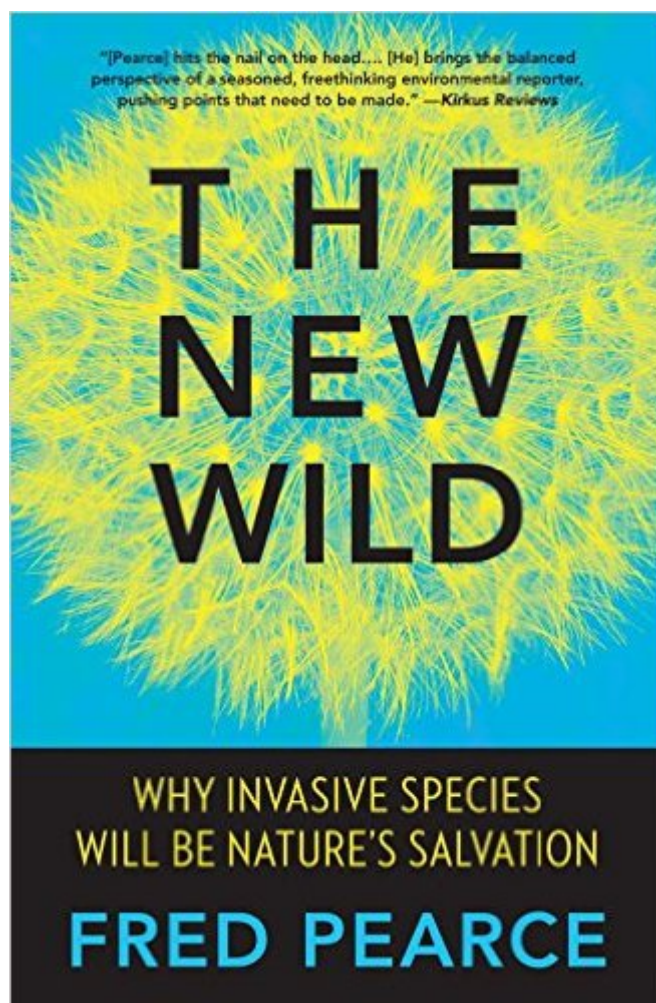


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The New Wild: Why Invasive Species Will Be Nature's Salvation



Synopsis

Named one of the best books of 2015 by *The Economist* A provocative exploration of the "new ecology" and why most of what we think we know about alien species is wrong. For a long time, veteran environmental journalist Fred Pearce thought in stark terms about invasive species: they were the evil interlopers spoiling pristine "natural" ecosystems. Most conservationists and environmentalists share this view. But what if the traditional view of ecology is wrong? What if true environmentalists should be applauding the invaders? In *The New Wild*, Pearce goes on a journey across six continents to rediscover what conservation in the twenty-first century should be about. Pearce explores ecosystems from remote Pacific islands to the United Kingdom, from San Francisco Bay to the Great Lakes, as he digs into questionable estimates of the cost of invader species and reveals the outdated intellectual sources of our ideas about the balance of nature. Pearce acknowledges that there are horror stories about alien species disrupting ecosystems, but most of the time, the tens of thousands of introduced species usually swiftly die out or settle down and become model eco-citizens. The case for keeping out alien species, he finds, looks increasingly flawed. As Pearce argues, mainstream environmentalists are right that we need a rewilding of the earth, but they are wrong if they imagine that we can achieve that by reengineering ecosystems. Humans have changed the planet too much, and nature never goes backward. But a growing group of scientists is taking a fresh look at how species interact in the wild. According to these new ecologists, we should applaud the dynamism of alien species and the novel ecosystems they create. In an era of climate change and widespread ecological damage, it is absolutely crucial that we find ways to help nature regenerate. Embracing the new ecology, Pearce shows us, is our best chance. To be an environmentalist in the twenty-first century means celebrating nature's wildness and capacity for change. From the Hardcover edition.

Book Information

Paperback: 264 pages

Publisher: Beacon Press; Reprint edition (April 5, 2016)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0807039551

ISBN-13: 978-0807039557

Product Dimensions: 5.8 x 0.7 x 8.8 inches

Shipping Weight: 13.6 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.0 out of 5 stars. See all reviews (34 customer reviews)

Best Sellers Rank: #143,101 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #34 in Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Endangered Species #122 in Books > Science & Math > Nature & Ecology > Natural History #133 in Books > Science & Math > Biological Sciences > Animals > Wildlife

Customer Reviews

Without a doubt, this book is destined to be controversial or banished to the discount bin and buried away in a wave of unpopularity. I'm not sure which but won't be surprised if the author is plagued by hate mail for daring to take on the holy grail of invasive being bad. Heck, I was recently banished by a backyard gardening club for merely mentioning that I actually enjoy my (invasive) elephant ear plants in my very own backyard. Living in Florida, the issue of invasive species of both plants and animals is not only emotionally charged but borders on near hysteria. Now, make no mistake about it, my tendencies typically have me in the "tree hugger" camp but when it comes to many "invasive" plants and even animals, the science doesn't always add up...just common sense would dictate that it might be better to have an invasive rather than nothing whatsoever. Take frogs for example - massive frog die-off's are taking place across the state yet the official policy is to hunt down and kill cuban tree frogs which are one of the few to thrive in some areas. Now, whether you agree or disagree/like or dislike cuban tree frogs, there is ample evidence that many so called invasive varieties are not harmful but may in fact be quite positive in terms of diversity, habitat and food supply. The author does a great job providing examples of both good and bad invasive plants and animals. He also dares to tackle the "science" behind some of the popular quotes which get tossed around with minimal scrutiny and perhaps most telling of all...gives the reader a glance into the absolute atrocities perpetuated on nature in the name of wiping out invasives. All in all, a very well written book that is both accessible and informative.

The New Wild is an intriguing read, one that I recommend to anyone interested in the environment, in climate change, in preservation of endangered species. Fred Pearce's take on the "problem" of invasive species is a little-publicized approach, yet the endnotes show that he is not alone in his questioning of the relentlessly negative picture painted of "invasive species." I particularly appreciated his discussions of what really defines a "native species," especially when placed in opposition to those seen as alien or invasive. Why are tomatoes or potatoes "native plants" in the US when we know the history of their importing? What about birds that fly in and establish, on their own, colonies on islands where they had not existed for eons? How many generations does it take for them to become "native?" This is a book that raises some good questions about whether a

non-native species is necessarily "bad," discussing some of the ecological value that some of these may provide. For example, he cites several plants that survive and thrive on "disturbed" (ie, urban or over--grazed) lands, providing more food for native insects and small mammals and often revitalizing the soil more effectively than the native plants they may displace. Overall, *The New Wild* helps remind the readers of the sometimes unintended consequences of attempts to completely eradicate alien species, asking each of us to consider carefully before backing massive extermination efforts. The one weakness of the book is that Mr. Pearce does not adequately balance his concern for overly zealous efforts to eradicate "invasive species" to recognize that some of these campaigns do have merit. Elms and American chestnuts were decimated throughout much of the US in earlier years because of imported insects, just as the emerald ash borer currently threatens millions of ash trees throughout the Midwest. Are there other trees to replace the species that are lost? Of course, but there is still a huge, even if short term (in ecological time) loss to environments and economies. A little more balance in discussing these kinds of really destructive situations would have been welcome. That being said, I recommend *The New Wild* for anyone interested in the natural world around us. It provides some good balance to more publicized, and perhaps less helpful campaigns against these "invasive species."

The thesis of this book seems to be that prior to the invasion of a particular ecosystem by a foreign species, that ecosystem has already been attacked by another species, namely us. As you read through this book, you find more and more examples of environmental systems having been attacked by invasive species but only after having been weakened by human activity. The author points out that most invasive species either fail to get a hold on the ecosystem they are transplanted into or manage to coexist with the species that are already there. But when we go in and weaken an ecosystem by pollution then the ecosystem is made ripe for an invasion which, due to our tendency to travel about the world, bringing transplanting species of organisms, plants and animals with us, happens sooner or later. What is most interesting about this book is that in more than a few occasions, while there was, at first, a colossal expansion of the invasive species, the invasive species usually becomes a managed part of the ecosystem. Furthermore, the author argues, the reason for the expansion of the invasive species in the first place is that, one we have weakened the ecosystem already and two, sometimes various species actually thrive in the polluted ecosystems we create. So, as the invasive species consumes the pollution, it thrives, but when it finishes it dies back somewhat thus becoming a good, albeit new, citizen of that ecosystem. In short, nature takes care of nature, it is only when we weaken ecosystems that we find ourselves

with problems. The author does provide some counterexamples to his thesis. For instance, if a species is too powerful it might wipe out another species before the ecosystem rights itself but the author argues that this does not always happen in fact quite the contrary. I personally think that there are two lessons to learn here, one is that our main impact on the environment is not our globe trotting, species spreading ways, but rather our tendency to degrade ecosystems to the point where they are unable to withstand the introduction of a new species. The other is that nature is actually pretty robust. An ecosystem can adapt to the introduction of a new species provided that that ecosystem is robust enough to do so. Therefore, rather than stop traveling, we should start to be careful to maintain the ecosystems we travel back and forth to by not polluting them or otherwise stressing them. Nature can do the rest.

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