

Preface

AMERICANS have been among the world's greatest bird lovers for two hundred years, ever since Alexander Wilson, the father of American ornithology, bumped into John James Audubon in Audubon's store in Louisville in 1808, and sparked the creative fire which eventually produced *The Birds of America*. As befits the land which gave birth to the greatest bird book (by some distance) which the world has ever seen, American knowledge of ornithology is wide as well as deep; and so I hope American readers may understand that this is a book about birds that attempts to do something perhaps rather new: to locate the deeper meanings birds may have for us as people. And not only birds; by extension, it is an inquiry into how much the natural world in all its wonder means to us culturally, and from that, into the more pressing question: what might be the meaning of its loss.

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In recent years we have begun to apply a human metric to the value of nature, using the term ecosystem services, a utilitarian measure of how important, for example, rainforests are for supplying us with oxygen, rivers for supplying us with water, oceans for

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supplying us with fish. It is crude, but necessary, especially if we are to provide rationales for preserving nature in the face of development imperatives that in many parts of the world may seem overwhelming.

This inquiry is something different. It concerns itself with what the natural world means, not to human well-being, but to the human imagination, a field of study which is just beginning to emerge and has been tentatively labeled bioculture. It argues that our responses to nature are a profounder part of who we are than perhaps we have realized before; and from that it follows that the loss of the natural world, as we unwaveringly go forward with the wrecking of our planet, may be a deeper loss even than that of the ecosystems upon which we so critically depend.