What is *that?*



The animal on the cover looks like a bizarre hybrid of a horse, a pig, and a dinosaur. What is it?

It is a mammal called a tapir (pronounced TAY-per or tah-PEER), and its closest living relative is the rhinoceros. Tapirs are large plant-eaters that roam the forests of Central America, South America, and southeast Asia. They use their flexible snouts to grab and eat tender leaves and fruits, both on land and during long excursions under water.

Learning about tapirs entails a journey that highlights both plant biology and human impacts on the environment. When a tapir devours a fig—one of its favorite foods—it also swallows seeds, each containing the beginnings of a new fig tree. Later, as the animal wanders through the forest, it deposits the seeds with its nutrient-rich droppings on the forest floor. Tiny fruit trees soon sprout from the seeds and reach toward the sun. Tapirs therefore act as tree farmers in the forest.

Unfortunately, tapir populations are shrinking. Humans kill these large mammals for meat and replace their forest home with farmland. As the tapirs disappear, the fruit trees they disperse are also dwindling. The ripple effects extend to other fruit-eating animals as well. Protecting the tapir is therefore a key step to preserving forest diversity. Setting aside tapir habitat, discouraging poaching, and closely monitoring tapir populations can make a big difference.

Humans face a unique dilemma: We know that all species are connected, but we also destroy the very habitats that these species need. Understanding biology—the subject of this book—is one key to balancing trade-offs as we meet our immediate needs while protecting the ecosystems that support us.



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