

December 24, 2006

Being Green

From celebrations and odes to dire warnings and documented disasters, this year's environmentally oriented books sound the alarm.

By Margo Hammond and Ellen Heltzel, Special to the Star Tribune

Tree huggers, you are not alone anymore. Julia Roberts and George Clooney pose in green for a special environmental issue of Vanity Fair. Kermit the Frog flaks hybrid SUVs, while evangelical Christians shun cars with big engines and ask, "What would Jesus drive?" Talk show host Don Imus promotes a nonprofit line of ecologically minded cleaning products. There's no question: If being green isn't exactly mainstream, a lot of tributaries are sure flowing in its direction. And not a moment too soon. Climate change, while still controversial, is no longer the exclusive domain of card-carrying environmentalists. The subject of clean air has gone global, as the United States fights its own muck and China's prosperity sends pollution to our shores. Childhood asthma rates have doubled in the past 20 years and the list of cancers attributed to environmental toxins continues to grow. There's some good news once in a while: A recent report said reforestation is up worldwide, meaning more trees to swallow our carbon dioxide. But oil and fresh water are being depleted, and the state of our oceans is challenged. Fortunately, recent books suggest either antidotes to the problems or enhance awareness of our interconnectedness with our surroundings and other living things. So we recommend that you color your holiday green, and spend your gift certificates on books that express your wish for goodwill on Earth and toward Earth. Here's our top 10:

ODES TO THE EARTH

"Homegrown: Language for an American Landscape," edited by Barry Lopez (Trinity University, 450 pages, \$29.95)

The generous format of this book belies the fact that there are no pictures, only occasional drawings. But don't despair: This is a reference book with style. Lopez, a poetic writer and former National Book Award winner ("Arctic Dreams"), has brought together his literary kin to create a dictionary of terms that deal with the ground under our feet. This lexicon ranges from "angle of repose" (with mention of Wallace Stegner, who used the geologic term as the title of his most celebrated novel) to "back bay" (associated with Boston, but applicable to various locales) to "wrack line" (the debris left on the beach by the tides). A keeper for anyone who is curious about words for physical spaces and places.

"The Creation: An Appeal to Save Life on Earth," by E.O. Wilson (W.W. Norton, 160 pages, \$21.95)

This slim book from the noted entomologist and ant expert is the perfect one to plop under the tree for a politically passionate friend or relative. Wilson pulls no punches here: As a secular scientist who has raised the ire of devout Christians in the past, he says it's time to get around theological differences and recognize our shared responsibility to address the

threat to biological diversity. Addressing his discourse to a hypothetical clergyman, he asks that we move past arguments about the origins of life and work to prevent extinction of threatened animal and plant species.

"Return to Wild America: A Yearlong Search for the Continent's Natural Soul," by Scott Weidensaul (North Point, \$26)

Fifty years ago, famous birder Roger Tory Peterson and British naturalist James Fisher immortalized their 30,000-mile trek around the continent in a classic called "Wild America." Weidensaul celebrates the anniversary by retracing their journey and comparing notes. Although not happy about much of what he sees, he skips the Cassandra role by pointing out how much more environmentally aware we've become, with new parks and refuges created and some threatened species on the comeback trail.

CLIMATE CHANGE

"Field Notes from a Catastrophe," by Elizabeth Kolbert (Bloomsbury, 192 pages, \$22.95)

Based on her three-part series for New Yorker magazine, Kolbert offers the most readable explanation of global warming yet. For those who still have doubts that the danger is real, check out Kolbert's fascinating if depressing descriptions of glaciers melting, butterflies turning up in new habitats and increasingly rising temperatures.

"The Weather Makers: How Man Is Changing the Climate and What It Means for Life on Earth," by Tim Flannery (Atlantic Monthly, 384 pages, \$24)

Crank up the volume for this one. Paleontologist Flannery covers the same subject but with more passion than the coolly factual Kolbert. Sometimes an alarmist's sensibility is required to get your attention, and this book does the job, as Flannery examines the consequences of our dependence on fossil fuels and calls for change.

"An Inconvenient Truth: The Planetary Emergency of Global Warming and What We Can Do About It," by Al Gore (Rodale, 328 pages, \$21.95)

Al Gore, who downplayed his environmental bona fides during his 2000 presidential bid, is back on the green track. Following up on his best-selling book "Earth in the Balance," he is on the road with a documentary and this accompanying text, warning that the time to do something about global warming is now.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

"Cool Creatures, Hot Planet: Exploring the Seven Continents," by Marty Essen (Encante Press, \$19.95)

A former talent agent in Minneapolis, Essen accidentally turned his midlife crisis into a crusade for animal conservation after he and his wife, Deb, devoted 3½ years to observing endangered species around the world. His self-published, 460-page travelogue puts his travels on paper in an everyman tone backed up by research and a handful of stunning photos, including a cover shot of the author with a rather large insect on his face. Great for the armchair traveler.

"Going, Going, Gone? Animals on the Brink of Extinction and How to Turn the Tide," by Malcolm Tait (Think Books, 160 pages, \$17.95)

Here's a picture book for the conservation-minded. At least 1 million species are in danger of extinction before the end of the century. In this book, 100 of them, chosen by an equal number of conservation organizations around the world, are highlighted. Each plant or animal gets a two-page spread with photographs, information about the species and suggestions of how we might try to save it.

"Tigers in Red Weather: A Quest for the Last Wild Tigers," by Ruth Padel (Walker, 432 pages, \$26.95)

So, you didn't think you were that interested in tigers? Well, think again: Padel, a poet and direct descendant of Charles Darwin, tells the story of her two-year trek through jungles and swamps as both a memoir and call to arms to save this endangered species. This book is very personal but also a pleasure to read and belongs in the hands of environmentally aware wordsmiths, who will appreciate the poetic references, including William Blake's "The Tyger" and Emily Dickinson's "Civilization -- spurns -- the Leopard!"

ENDANGERED HABITATS

"The Ravaging Tide: Strange Weather, Future Katrinas, and the Coming Death of America's Coastal Cities," by Mike Tidwell (Free Press, 198 pages, \$24)

Hurricane Katrina has spawned countless books, but none capture the connection between man's behavior and that disaster better than this one by the author of an earlier book that predicted such an event, "Bayou Farewell: The Rich Life and Tragic Death of Louisiana's Cajun Coast." Tidwell takes a sweeping look at how politics have both interfered with and helped the massive, and perhaps impossible, task of saving the country's most extensive wetlands. Global warming, he says, demands an immediate turn to alternative forms of energy so that the rest of coastal America can avoid being swamped.

Margo Hammond, of Florida, and Ellen Heltzel, of Oregon, are co-authors of the Book Babes column, which can be found at magazines.ivillage.com/goodhousekeeping/view/babes.