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The Philosophy of Extinction: Environmental Humanities and the Biodiversity Crisis, by Thom van Dooren

Lecture at the presentation ceremony of the 7th Biophilia Award
in Environmental Humanities and Social Sciences
February 5, 2026

Species are disappearing today at a staggering rate. While many people are aware of this fact, it often does not seem to register in a meaningful way. Conservation agencies produce long lists of Latin names of the endangered and extinct, but they remain somehow abstract. Pushing back against this tendency, my research is an effort to explore what extinction means, how and why it matters, and what it demands of us, as well as to cultivate new modes of storytelling that allow us to share these insights with wider audiences. This work is inescapably multidisciplinary, drawing the insights of the humanities into conversation with the natural sciences and ethnographic research with local communities. In company with a growing group of colleagues, I think of this work as a kind of "field philosophy."

Understanding extinction in richer ways requires us to "thicken" our sense of who disappearing species are; to add some flesh to the bones of the dead and dying. This means moving beyond the list of species names to understand more of their particular and unique *ways of life*: how they hunt or reproduce, how they take care of their young or grieve for their dead. Of course, we can never hope to sketch anything like a complete picture of the ways of life of other species. Much of who they are will always remain opaque to us. For example, the chemosensory worlds of snails must remain largely beyond our capacity to imagine, let alone inhabit. And yet, the effort to learn more about them matters deeply. It allows us to appreciate that, as the philosopher Vinciane Despret has noted, it is an entire *world* that is lost in extinction: "Every sensation of every being of the world is a mode through which the world lives and feels itself … [and when] a being is no more, the world narrows all of a sudden, and a part of reality collapses."

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When we pay attention to other ways of life in their particularity, it becomes immediately clear that they are not formed and sustained in isolation from a wider world. Each animal, plant, fungi, or bacteria, is fundamentally and inescapably a mode or way of being and becoming *with others*.

While there is a commonsense definition of extinction that tells us that it is a singular event that takes place with the death of the last individual of that kind, in many ways this understating is misleading. Instead, I have argued for the need to explore "the dull edge" of extinction. From this perspective, extinction is understood as a drawn-out process of biocultural unravelling that begins well before the death of the last individual and continues to ripple out into the world long afterwards, drawing in a broad range of humans and nonhumans as relationships change and break down. In my own research, one of the starkest examples of this process was the decline of India's vultures with all of the associated impacts on human health, livelihoods, and cultural and religious practices, alongside impacts on a range of other species.

My approach to the ethics of extinction emerges out of this understanding of it as a process of unworlding and biocultural unravelling. Crucially, it is an approach that does not aim to produce an ethical "system" that can be put to work in disparate contexts. Refusing generalization, I instead attempt to think with and through situated examples of living beings at the edge of loss.

When we approach extinction in this way it is immediately apparent that it is a domain of competing ethical obligations. In my research on the conservation of the critically endangered whooping crane, I was drawn into a world of "violent care." This is a world in which individual birds must live diminished lives in captivity, subjected to stressful processes of artificial insemination, while other animals suffer and die in a range of ways, including cranes of less threatened

species used as surrogates and potential predators killed. None of this is at all unique to this case. All over the world, care for endangered species requires forms of violence both towards members of a range of other species, as well as sometimes towards individuals of the endangered species.

Of course, it is not only the wellbeing of various nonhumans that are at stake here. In other cases, the needs of diverse human communities are impacted on by the decline or the conservation of a threatened species. For example, efforts to conserve the critically endangered, forest-dwelling crows of the Mariana Islands have often conflicted with the livelihoods and aspirations of the Indigenous Chamorro people.

Grappling with these kinds of ethical questions requires slow, careful, relentlessly specific engagement with multispecies communities. It requires that ethics move out of the armchair into the field, to draw on the insights of the natural sciences – from ethology to ecology – and the lived experiences of local communities whose lives are bound up with disappearing species in a host of different, profoundly unequal ways.

While there are undoubtedly a variety of ways to explore ethical questions in their complex empirical contexts, my body of work on extinction takes the form of a set of stories. In contrast to a lot of highly technical academic writing, narratives have the potential to be memorable, accessible, and engaging to wide audiences. Storytelling can also do important ethical work. Stories can summon up a thicker sense of the diverse, overlapping, and sometimes conflicting, meanings and consequences of extinction, drawing ever more voices and perspectives into the discussion. The point of telling stories like these, of course, is not simply to inform but to transform. As the philosopher Megan Craig notes:

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"The stories we tell and those we hear bear profoundly upon the texture of our lives and our openness or closedness to other forms of life."

My sincere hope is that the stories that I and my colleagues tell can make a difference in the world. That we can open up new and richer ways of understanding what extinction means, why it matters, why we must respond, and how we can do so in ways that take seriously the flourishing of diverse, multispecies communities.

But, of course, that isn't always possible. Sometimes, it is simply too late. In cases like these, storytelling still matters deeply. Stories can become a kind of witnessing: an act of faithfulness to the dead or dying. Even if we cannot change the situation for them – prevent the extinction of a species, or the loss of a precious ecosystem – we must still refuse to turn away or ignore that loss. Turning towards, rather than away, is an effort to cultivate some semblance of an ethical relationship with the many living beings and kinds who are slipping out of the world around us today.