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Preserving Natural World Both Essential and Feasible, Says Harvard's E. O. Wilson  
September 7, 2005

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. -- In a speech that was both sobering and optimistic, one of the world's preeminent biologists, Harvard's Edward O. Wilson, told the President's Convocation at Illinois Wesleyan on Wednesday (Sept. 7) that the central problem of the new century is "how to raise the poor to an endurable quality of life, both at home and abroad, while preserving as much of the natural world as possible."

Wilson said that we are currently passing through what he termed a "bottleneck," which will come to an end once the world population stabilizes at about 9 billion people and then begins to decline.

As we enter that bottleneck, he said, we have to overcome the rapid rise of per capita consumption in order to get through to what we hope will be a better world than the one we know today.

"This planet, if managed right, can be a paradise for a smaller world population," said Wilson, who has won both the National Medal of Science and two Pulitzer Prizes.

[> Listen to the Convocation Address](#) (Requires RealAudio)

Noting that both the poor and biological diversity happen to be concentrated in developing countries, Wilson said that the solution has to flow from the recognition that each depends upon the other.

"The poor have little chance to improve their lives in a devastated environment," he said. "Conversely the natural environments where most of biodiversity hangs on cannot survive much longer the press of land-hungry people who have nowhere else to go."

Wilson began his remarks by noting that scientists have discovered that the biosphere is not only richer in diversity than was ever previously imagined but that it is also declining at an accelerating rate due to human activity.

"If this matter is neglected unduly," he predicted, "we will lose as many as half the species of the world's plants and animals by the end of the century."

Human activity, Wilson said, is the cause of the huge rise in the extinction of species, which is accelerating because the last remnants of ecosystems are being not just reduced but eliminated altogether.

According to Wilson, many of the species are only now being identified. Earth, he said, is actually a little known planet.

"We have little appreciation for what we are doing as we continue to wipe out ecosystems and species inventories," he said.

"We are flying blind. Each one of these species is exquisitely well adapted to a particular part of the environment. Some of the species are millions of years old. They fit together, and each has a unique history of its own."

In considering what might be done to reverse these trends, Wilson said that the costs are not prohibitive. For instance, he cited 25 "hotspots," areas in the world such as forests and coral reefs, which cover just 1.4 percent of the land's surface but are the exclusive homes of 44 percent of the known species of vascular plants and 36 percent of vertebrates.

"At the current time about \$6 billion from all sources, most of it from government, is spent annually on conservation," said Wilson. "A recent estimate by a team of economists and biologists is that an investment of \$28 billion — a single investment — would be enough to throw a cover of protection over these 25 'hotspots.' If \$28 billion seems a large number to save nature, that is only one tenth of one percent of the annual gross domestic product of all the countries in the world."

Consequently, Wilson emphasized, protecting these critical "hotspots" can be achieved without taking the fortunes of the world or diminishing the quality of life.

"The resources exist. The technology exists. The cost is not high," he said. "And the long-term benefits are just beyond calculation."



Edward O. Wilson