Human success at the expense of other species is “a pretty awful legacy”

Author Elizabeth Kolbert challenges us to see human history through the eyes of other animals.

By David Roberts@drvolts Updated Oct 12, 2017, 10:38am EDT

Elizabeth Kolbert, smiling despite knowledge of our certain doom. (Barclay)

Last year, the Nation Institute launched a Jonathan Schell Memorial Lecture Series, in honor of the late environmental journalist. The topic is rather grandiose: **The Fate of the Earth**.

The first lecture, last year, was given by famed environmental writer and activist Bill McKibben, who **spoke about climate change**.

This year, the lecture was delivered Wednesday by Elizabeth Kolbert, a New Yorker staff writer and the author of several books, including 2014’s Pulitzer-winning ***The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History***.

Kolbert’s lecture took on a larger and, if anything, even more difficult subject, namely what the Anthropocene — the geological age of human

influence — is like from the perspective of other species. As humans have grown and spread, they have jammed unfamiliar animals and pathogens together in the geological blink of an eye, driving countless species to extinction. In the 3.8 billion-year history of life on this planet, she says, “no creature has ever changed the earth at the rate that we are changing it right now.”

As usual, Kolbert’s message is bracing and free of false-hope homilies. You can watch a video of the lecture **here**.

Kolbert is something of a hero of mine. Her 2006 ***Field Notes From a Catastrophe*** was the first book on climate change I ever read, and its concluding line still haunts me: “It may seem impossible to imagine that a technologically advanced society could choose, in essence, to destroy itself, but that is what we are now in the process of doing.”

So it was a pleasure to chat with her by phone about the issues and difficult moral dilemmas her lecture raises — perspectives too often absent from our typically human-centric discussions of environmental damage. Our conversation has been edited for length and clarity.

“Toughie,” the world’s last known Rabbs' fringe-limbed tree frog, died in 2016. Are we guilty of murder? (Wikipedia)

David Roberts

Why did you choose to focus on biodiversity? Is it just because Bill McKibben took climate change already?

Elizabeth Kolbert

[laughs] Well, you know, I don’t want to downplay that. But at the same time, I have come to see — and this was the impetus for writing *The Sixth Extinction* — that climate change is part of an even bigger issue. So when the topic is the Fate of the Earth, it seemed like you could open it up into this even bigger issue, the way we are changing the planet, for all intents and purposes, permanently. As I say, unfortunately, climate change is just one of those ways, and not even necessarily the most significant.

David Roberts

Climate change is such a huge issue, it’s already difficult for people to fit it in their heads. To put it into an even bigger context ... how do you even go about that? Do you feel like you’ve successfully gotten your head around it?

Elizabeth Kolbert

I don’t think anyone does, really. The reason the Anthropocene as a concept really took off since Paul Crutzen first proposed it — which is not very long ago — is that it gives us a framework for thinking about a lot of things that seem disparate but are all pointing in one direction. To look at it in geological terms has been a really interesting and useful exercise.

I've been out in the field with people who are trying to look at human impact on the planet in terms of the great history of life — half a billion years of multicellular life. How is this going to look millions of years from now? When you go through that exercise, it tends to wash away everything that we humans are attached to and leaves just these geochemical markers, basically.

You find that, wow, what humans are doing is really significant. It's significant on the scale of the history of life. It kills your worldview, I think.

David Roberts

One way people have tried to narrow this, to make it manageable, is to frame the benefits of biodiversity in human terms — "ecosystem services" and what they do for us. What do you think of that tactic?

Elizabeth Kolbert

I totally understand it and sympathize with it. And I think there's a very compelling case to be made that, however independent we think we are from biological systems and geochemical systems, we're very clearly not. All of our oxygen is biologically produced. We're still intimately connected — even those of us who live in a high-rise in Manhattan — to this world, even though we may not appreciate that.

So you mess around with these systems, you push them too far, and it's going to come back and bite humanity in the ass. I think that's true.

But I also think it's true that, taking the broadest possible view, humans are just one of many, many species that have lived on Earth. So even if we decided it is possible for us to escape unscathed through a mass extinction, the idea that we would eliminate many of the other species on Earth, including our closest relatives (we're in the process of eliminating the great ape), is a pretty awful legacy.

A gorilla, one of many Hominidae (great ape) species humans are crowding out. (Wikipedia)

David Roberts

When we drive a species to extinction, is that like murder?

Elizabeth Kolbert

Yes.

David Roberts

We assess people's actions in terms of intentionality and responsibility, but we don't assess "natural processes" that way. We don't think poorly of a lion for killing a gazelle. What special obligations do humans have to other species?

Elizabeth Kolbert

I don't have a straightforward answer to that. It turns out that our ethics are based on humans and human consciousness, so when we look at other species, we often try to do it in terms of consciousness. Are they

consciously suffering or not? There's a lot of talk of ethical treatment of animals, for example, in the context of farming.

But is there ethical treatment of animals in the context of just the world? Nature, red in tooth and claw; everything is competing for existence. It's not even clear to me if it's possible to have what we as humans would identify as an ethical system that would tell us what the right thing to do [in the Anthropocene] is.

That being said, I don't think that absence lets us off the hook.

David Roberts

I've certainly heard the perspective expressed that morals are just for other humans. Like, if we travel around the world in our ships and the accidental byproduct is that some frog goes extinct, that's just how nature works. It has no moral valence.

Elizabeth Kolbert

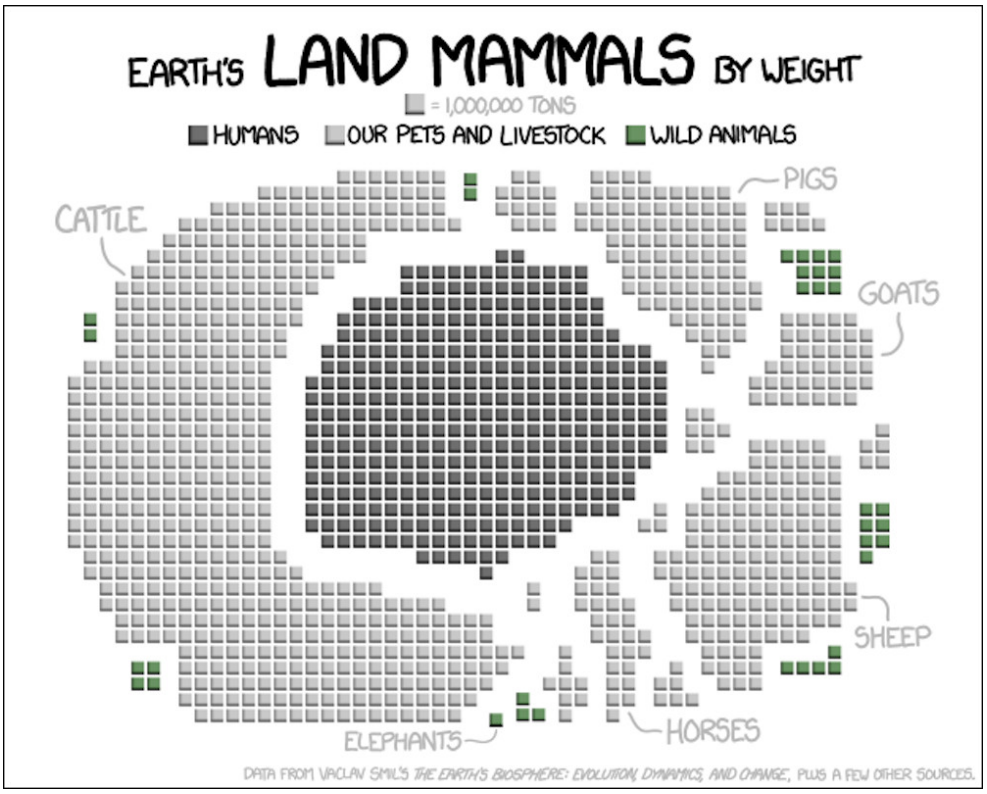
On one hand, these are such big issues that they're hard to talk about, but on the other hand, we are so powerless. Yes, people move around the world. Many, many species of amphibians are gone, purely accidentally — to this day, we don't know who or how exactly those moved around.

As you say, intentionality is very, very difficult to parse now. That's also true in these cases of pathogens moving around. But there are lots of things along the way between poaching an elephant — which is also a huge, huge problem right now, simply killing things for their tusks or their horns or whatever — and accidentally moving a pathogen around.

But what I'm really trying to point to is just the incommensurability of the way we like to think of our actions and the way they're playing out in the

world. I don't exactly have a takeaway there. It's more a negative message. It's more, let's not be smug about our ethics.

We can all agree that we have these human ethics, toward other humans, that we're not observing; that's step number one. But even if we were observing them and we were simultaneously doing in the rest of the biosphere ... that should still give us pause.



A classic XKCD comic showing that humans and their domestic animals are, ah, decisively winning the mammal race. (XKCD)

David Roberts

Where do your moral and ethical principles come from? Are you religious? Or [do you] have some sort of philosophy on these matters?

Elizabeth Kolbert

No. I have some personal — I don't know if I want to call them heroes — people whose work I have been inspired by, but they're not a tradition.

I'd say it's ad hoc. I would not claim to have a systematic view of the world.

David Roberts

One thing you run into when you discuss these kinds of things is you say, "We shouldn't drive this frog species extinct," and someone asks, "Why?" You say, "Seems bad." Pretty quickly your ethics ground out in raw instincts.

Elizabeth Kolbert

Yes, I agree.

First of all, it's an area where ethics and aesthetics and science come together. And because we're dealing with a world that we only very, very partially understand, it's very difficult to answer these questions.

But the other thing is that the more you try to get at the answers, the more you realize we are often blocked from seeing the impact of our actions. You can't even anticipate them. We're just humans, this one species that has a certain way of making our living. All around us are other answers to the question, "How do you survive on this planet?"

People compare it to burning down a library. That's what we're doing, just eliminating a certain knowledge of how to make it in this world.

But because those are such alien ways, you just don't even know how other species make a living. Until something goes really radically awry, we don't even notice it. And things are going radically awry often, and we don't even notice it.

David Roberts

Charles C. Mann, the author, **thinks we are no different than protozoa** — absent natural limits and predators, we're going to breed

and breed and overbreed and crash. Do you see any realistic hope for our species asserting self-aware control over that primal biological force?

Elizabeth Kolbert

There's a lot to unpack there.

First of all, the question of how many people can the world support. Predictions are that eventually, toward the end of this century, if certain demographic trends continue, that world population will peak around 10 billion people. Now, whether we can get through that and then bring the population down and have a happy, healthy, prosperous world — that's pretty much beyond my pay grade.

Anyone who thinks they can tell you that is full of shit. We just don't know.

But what I am trying to point out is the flip side of that, which is, okay, it's true we have defied all these expectations, right? When Malthus was writing, there were roughly a billion people on the planet; now, there's 7.5 billion people. So he was clearly, massively wrong.

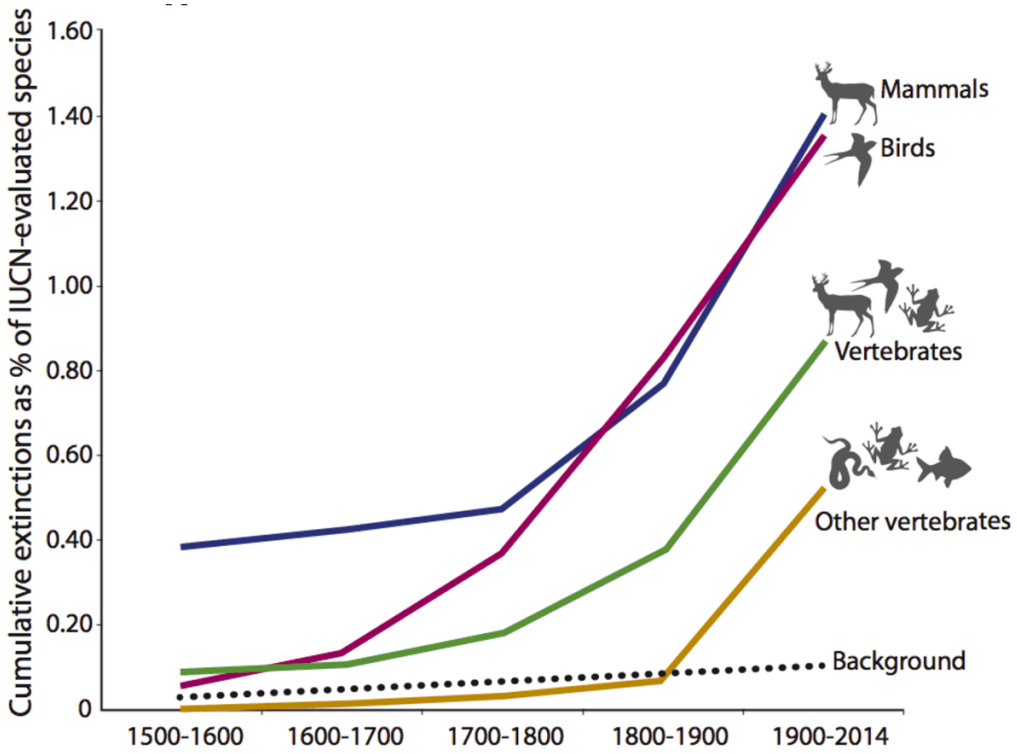
But while we've increased our numbers, it has been at the expense of other things. We are simply consuming other species. We are consuming a tremendous amount of the primary productivity of the oceans, for example, just emptying them out.

And so there's two questions really, it seems to me. One is will humanity make it through this basically unrestrained growth, both in terms of numbers and in how much we as individuals consume? And meanwhile, what happens to everything else?

The answer is not necessarily the same. I mean, humanity has found that it can reproduce and consume at a very rapid rate and, depending

on how you look at it, the world continues apace — though obviously many people are not doing well, many people are.

But most other species are not doing too well.



Not doing well at all. (Science Advances)

David Roberts

One thing I always appreciated about your writing is your tragic imagination. I feel like lots of folks in the climate discussion lack that. [When author David Wallace-Wells wrote a **story on the tragic potential of climate change**, he was roundly **scolded by the climate positivity police**.]

Elizabeth Kolbert

I really appreciate that. Thank you.

David Roberts

American culture, in particular, lacks a tragic imagination — an ability to imagine that things can go horribly wrong.

Elizabeth Kolbert

I completely agree with you. That's the only way we can explain what's going on right now.

A couple years ago, we lived in Rome for a year. In Rome, you are surrounded by the ruins of a civilization. You don't have the same our-best-days-are-ahead-of-us nonsense.