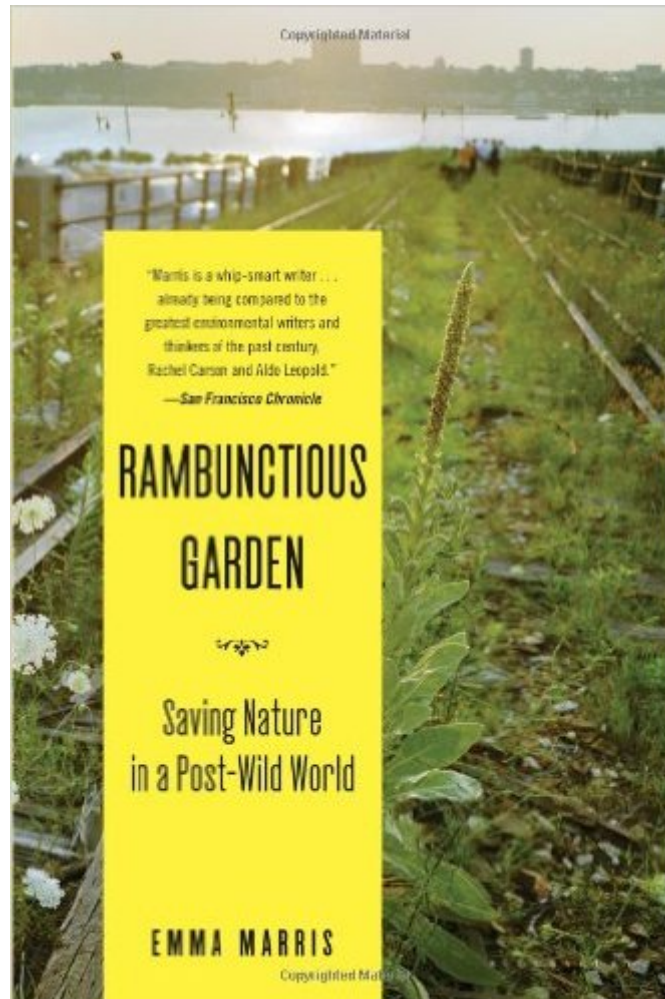


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# The Rambunctious Garden: Saving Nature In A Post-Wild World



## Synopsis

A paradigm shift is roiling the environmental world. For decades people have unquestioningly accepted the idea that our goal is to preserve nature in its pristine, pre-human state. But many scientists have come to see this as an outdated dream that thwarts bold new plans to save the environment and prevents us from having a fuller relationship with nature. Humans have changed the landscapes they inhabit since prehistory, and climate change means even the remotest places now bear the fingerprints of humanity. Emma Marris argues convincingly that it is time to look forward and create the "rambunctious garden," a hybrid of wild nature and human management. In this optimistic book, readers meet leading scientists and environmentalists and visit imaginary Edens, designer ecosystems, and Pleistocene parks. Marris describes innovative conservation approaches, including rewilding, assisted migration, and the embrace of so-called novel ecosystems. *Rambunctious Garden* is short on gloom and long on interesting theories and fascinating narratives, all of which bring home the idea that we must give up our romantic notions of pristine wilderness and replace them with the concept of a global, half-wild rambunctious garden planet, tended by us.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Emma Marris, the author of *Rambunctious Garden* (RG), has written a book that one should read, if only to become familiar with new proposed strategies and tools that seeks to expand conservation beyond traditional approaches. She does not think the earth should be managed solely (or even

mostly) to benefit people, does she argue that more traditional preservationist strategies should be abandoned. Nevertheless, I worry that an emphasis on these alternative approaches will distract conservation efforts from proven conservation strategies like parks and wilderness. But you owe it to yourself to read her book and determine whether her arguments are convincing. Here's my take on her book. She loves the nature hiding in back street alleys and along the highway median strip. Marris believes it's time to abandon (or de-emphasize) what she sees as outdated and naïve conservation strategies such as creation of national parks and wilderness reserves. She feels the biggest obstacles to a bold new world of "designer" and "novel" ecosystems is the "wilderness cult" that naively wants to preserve "natural" landscapes--which she says do not exist anymore. Marris espouses the anthropocentric perspective that the Earth is more or less a resource cookie jar for humans--to be used carefully to be sure--but she doesn't really question whether ethically or ecologically this is ultimately a good idea. Marris is a cheerleader for the dangerous concept that humans are both intelligent enough and wise enough to "manage" the Earth--the 'smart resource management' school of thought. She is a prime example of the kind person biologist David Ehrenfeld had in mind when he wrote his book the Arrogance of Humanism. Embrace weeds, we are told. Assemble new designer ecosystems that can flourish with human activities. Increased economic growth is not seen as a problem, rather an opportunity to work with industry for the betterment of nature. She sees this prospect of human dominance of global ecosystems as uplifting and joyful, as explained here from her website. "We argue that the Anthropocene--the epoch marked by widespread human influence--is not by definition a disaster, and that accepting the scope of man's changes to the Earth can set the stage not for hopelessness, but for a more hopeful environmental movement. I hope it gets people who have been feeling gloomy about Earth thinking, active, even optimistic again. We can make things better, not just less worse." Marris's optimism can only be shared by those who are blissfully ignorant. As the ecologist Aldo Leopold noted: "One of the penalties of an ecological education is that one lives alone in a world of wounds. Much of the damage inflicted on land is quite invisible to laymen". Marris unabashedly declares that she is neither an ecologist nor environmental activist. And she says she seldom ventures far from a road. She proudly wears this lack of experience and knowledge as a badge of honor; and instead of displaying some humility, she believes this lack of ecological training gives her a unique perspective. However, she is more like the layman that Leopold suggests is blissfully unaware of the ecological wounds and damage all around. Marris chooses to characterize creation of parks, wilderness areas, and other reserves based on what she calls the "Yellowstone Model" as an extension of colonialism that has displaced native people, and other local people--and thus spread

human exploitation in general. This is in contrast to wildlands supporters who view such protected areas as a significant moral and ethical accomplishment. To members of what she derisively dismisses as the "wilderness cult", parks and wildlands reserves are places where society in essence practices a kind of self-discipline and a willingness to put at least some parts of the Earth off limits to human exploitation and development. It is surprising that she chooses to trash Yellowstone, because despite the inappropriate policies of the past such as killing off wolves (now restored), stocking of exotic fish, and so on, Yellowstone is still in better ecological condition than any other surrounding public or private lands. The only real problem with Yellowstone Park is that it needs to be enlarged. As a conservation model, it is the best we have. Instead of supporting the ecosystems created by the interaction of natural events, evolution, and geological time, Marris supports acceptance of novel ecosystems. Novel ecosystems are entirely new arrangements of plants and animals fostered by human design or at least human intervention, which some call 'techno-ecosystems'. In my view as an ecologist, the techno world view is one of the major threats to natural systems. Marris argues there are few "natural" ecosystems left, so novel and designer ecosystems are not a threat, but an opportunity to create pleasing landscapes, much as a gardener might choose which plants to favor in the backyard flower patch--hence her reference to 'rambunctious garden' in the title of her book. However, by moving the goalposts to vacant city lots as an acceptable desired future condition of the landscape, she implicitly, if not explicitly, provides cover for all manner of environmental degradation. I can agree with her that not all human landscapes are necessarily abhorrent. Human dominated countryside and cities can be attractive and beautiful and can even provide for a lot of ecosystem functions. But there is abundant evidence that these human landscapes tend to be less sustainable and more disruptive to biodiversity than natural ecosystems. One of the problems with a critique of her book is that it's full of contradictions. If one picks out something to criticize, someone else will be able to find another part of the book where she appears to support exactly the opposite perspective. She'll bash creation of Yellowstone National Park and other preserves as old fashioned and hopelessly naïve efforts at conservation, but then later laud conservation strategies like the Yellowstone-to-Yukon Initiative which essentially are efforts to protect as much land as wilderness or parks as possible. What this suggests to me is that Marris can talk the talk, but does not walk the walk in terms of her knowledge of ecology, genetics, conservation history, and even the intricacies of resource management. She knows the key phrases and can briefly describe the key ideas, but there is no real systemic analysis. She will often discuss conflicting ideas without seeming aware of the contradictions in her examples. For instance, late in the book, she outlines the need to protect genetic diversity and does

an admirable job of explaining why this is important, yet earlier, she is an advocate of "assisted migration" and "designer ecosystems" where plants and animals are mixed up and moved around based on human notions of what is a good or useful mix. As any biologist can tell you, moving species around and mixing things up is one of the best ways to destroy genetic diversity, since species or populations with unique genetic attributes can be swamped by newcomers. Think of the numerous cutthroat trout subspecies around the West that are endangered by genetic swamping from hybridization with rainbow trout—that were "assisted" in their migration into new watersheds by state wildlife agencies and fishermen's bucket brigades. Marris seems to have gotten most of her information from reading papers by and interviews with some researchers. Reading scientific papers is important, but it is no replacement for time spent outdoors in natural environments and years of immersion in ecological training. She was an English major in college and appears to have started to study these issues as a reporter for Nature Magazine. Consequently, despite being a good researcher, she hasn't had the time to really delve into these issues. As I read RG, I kept thinking about some of the smart, but inexperienced younger students I shared graduate seminars with while in school. They were good at memorizing and regurgitating factual information. Yet because they hadn't been around the woods enough to have acquired the breadth of knowledge that comes from extensive familiarity with the academic literature and actual on the ground, hands-on experience, these students, like Marris, were often unable to put forth a systemic analysis. Throughout RG Marris suggests that an old paradigm of working to protect natural patterns of diversity from human activities must be replaced by a new paradigm of accepting human-dominated ecosystems. In other words, protecting wild areas is passé, in part because, Marris would argue, there are few wild places left. Setting up a straw man of "pristine" wilderness to knock down, Marris suggests that many conservationists believe there are vast tracts of "wilderness" where the footprint of human activity does not exist. However, if she really had done the proper scholarship she would know that few (if any) serious observers of nature today believe there are "pristine" lands, in the sense of completely untouched by humans. Plus if she had done enough background reading, she would know this debate was hashed out decades ago, and her observations offer no further insights. The idea of wilderness is not black and white, but more nuanced—nuances that Marris and others of her persuasion are unwilling to acknowledge. Most wilderness advocates readily admit that human influences are widespread and pernicious—but that on some parts of the globe natural processes dominate to a greater degree than in more humanized landscapes. It is the degree of naturalness, not the complete absence of human influence, that makes some places wilder and less domesticated than others. To use just one legal definition, the word 'untrammeled' as defined in the

Wilderness Act does not mean untouched, or state of "purity"; rather it defines wilderness areas as places that "generally appear to have been affected primarily by the forces of nature, with the imprint of man's work substantially unnoticeable." Downtown Los Angeles is considerably more modified to human ends than say the Arctic Wildlife Refuge in Alaska. Arctic Refuge, by the Wilderness Act's definition, would qualify as "wilderness" even though the refuge is certainly not "pristine" in a literal sense. Marris, like many of the Post Modern revisionists before her, also tends to exaggerate the impacts of aboriginal peoples. She equates the modifications, degradation, and exploitation of modern technological human societies -- swollen to populations never seen before on Planet Earth -- as essentially similar in effect, if not in scope, with the alterations effected by aboriginal peoples. Native people, we are told, were the first members of the smart resource management school of thought. Just because aboriginals may have hunted, gathered plants, and set fires, she jumps to the conclusion that no lands are genuinely wild in the sense of being largely "self-willed" and natural, so any new modification is just a natural extension of the aboriginal use and "management." There's no doubt that aboriginal peoples had some influence on the land. Early human hunters, it is now argued by many paleo-biologists, contributed to the extinction of some Pleistocene mammals, and many Pacific Islands bird species suffered extinction after the Polynesian people arrived. Nevertheless, the overall influence of aboriginal peoples upon the Earth was significantly lower due to low population numbers and limited technology, compared to today's techno society. In favorable, but localized areas Native American influences were likely significant, but the farther one ventured from villages, popular food gathering sites and favored hunting grounds, the more limited the human influence. Nor would anyone, I think, want to argue that just because aboriginal people caused species extinction, that makes modern extinction rates acceptable. Human presence has never been evenly distributed upon the face of the Earth. It is simply hyperbole on Marris' part to make sweeping statements like "we humans have changed every centimeter of the globe." Even with all our technology, much greater human population, and so forth, there are vast areas of the North American continent, the boreal forest, especially, where human presence is low and human influence is small compared to, say, the agricultural wastelands that dominate the former prairielands of America's heartland or the cityscapes scattered across the country. Similar degrees of human influence exist on all continents. Too many environmental disasters have been justified by exactly this kind of logic--humans are going to make things better. The bucket brigades of fishermen who dump fish willy-nilly across watersheds hoping to "improve" the fishing, as well as the state wildlife agencies that have planted non-native fish around the West, now pose a threat to the majority of native species. Likewise, the introduction of exotic grasses like

buffel grass for "improved" livestock forage is now overwhelming the Sonoran Desert biota. Even the inadvertent release of diseases from transplanting non-native nursery stock has led to the spread of Dutch elm disease, white pine blister rust, and other forest pathogens. These and many other examples of unintended consequences of human manipulation should be enough of a precautionary warning to anyone who has really studied the scientific literature. To the uninformed, the loss of a particular species may appear to have no serious consequences. For instance, proponents of ecosystem manipulation like Marris will often argue that substitution of an exotic species for a native one is more or less neutral and may even improve ecosystems. She seems to have adopted the idea that species are mere cogs in a wheel, and interchangeable with few long-term harms to ecosystems. Marris mocks ecologists who worry about invasives when she writes "the biggest obstacle [to moving species around] is the terror that many ecologists feel when they imagine introducing a species that might become--dum, dum, dum!--invasive." Again this demonstrates a real ignorance of the many species that may be co-dependent upon a native species. A dramatic comparison is between our native oak trees which support 532 Lepidoptera species (butterflies and moths), while the alien invasive Tree of Heaven (*Ailanthus altissima*) supports only two. In addition, at least a thousand other native insect species find homes and food in oak trees, in turn providing food for birds and other creatures. So the loss of an oak tree may not mean the loss of forest cover, but it can definitely have a major impact on biodiversity that is not obvious to the casual and poorly informed observer like Marris. While she dismisses traditional conservation approaches such as creation of national parks as naïve and ineffective, she provides no systemic analysis of the factors that are accelerating species extinction and biodiversity loss. If one were to believe Marris, the problem is not human population expropriating too much of the Earth's resources, land and water, but rather a "wilderness cult" that seeks to protect nature from human exploitation. I do not think Marris intends any malice, but her ideas implicitly provide cover to the industries and people whose activities are the source for environmental degradation around the world. Developers, logging companies, agricultural interests, ranchers, mining companies, energy companies are effectively given carte blanche to continue what they are doing because in the end everything that is a result of human activities is OK. I won't suggest that is Marris's intention, but that is the natural consequence of this perspective. She argues that we should celebrate weeds for they are survivors, as I imagine one can admire cockroaches, pigeons, and other species that have managed to flourish in the close proximity of humans. But there is a good reason why conservationists don't celebrate weeds. Not only do such plants and animals often overwhelm native species, frequently leading to a loss or degradation in ecosystem function and

biodiversity, but they are, as she notes, remarkably well adapted to human modifications. She also writes glowingly about how human land modification can "benefit" wildlife. She tells of visiting Nebraska's Platte River during the sandhill crane migration where she admires the concentrations of the birds. "But the Platte is heavily used by agriculture and industry and the reduction in water has changed the river. Without fast moving icy spring flows to scythe the vegetation off islands, heavy machinery must clear room for the cranes, which are now squeezed into a much smaller stretch of the river. The abundant food in the post-harvest cornfields all around makes it possible for so many to gather together. "The cranes' situation illustrates what is wrong with the human dominance and expropriation of the Earth's resources. One imagines that Marris would see the elk feed-grounds in Wyoming and salmon hatcheries on the West Coast also in a positive light since both facilitate concentrations of wildlife and use machines, energy and other measures to sustain wildlife at higher populations than the otherwise degraded wildlife habitat would permit. Yet while such concentrations are often to the delight of wildlife observers, hunters, and anglers, they are in fact examples of how badly degraded natural systems are that they must be sustained by artificial and energy intensive means. Instead of recognizing the mono-culture of GMO cornfields sustained by pesticides and fertilizers -- which are used to produce ethanol or feed livestock so people can have steaks and burgers -- as wasteful and ecologically damaging, she paints a rosy and reassuring picture of how such human activities actually "benefit" wildlife. Such concentrations of wildlife make them far more vulnerable to disease transmission, to localized catastrophic stochastic events and so on. Yet Marris asks, "Was this fantastic display [of cranes] somehow counterfeit because the cranes' numbers were `artificially' concentrated?" And she answers in a resounding "Nope. Not in my opinion." And that is the problem throughout the book. Because she fails to understand and articulate the underlying issues facing wild nature, and instead dismisses efforts to protect landscapes in as natural conditions as possible, she indirectly if not implicitly supports even more manipulation of the planet. It is the same perverse logic that promotes geo-engineering of the atmosphere as the antidote to global warming, instead of fighting to reduce CO2 emissions. I don't have any argument with her admonishment that we should appreciate the bits of nature that survive in our humanized world. I love the birds singing in my suburban yard, the frogs that have found a place to breed someplace under the shrubs and the occasional deer that may wander through my city lot. But I am not fooled. My city lot is not nearly as functional as a large wild reserve, nor is the collective effect of thousands of similar city lots any substitute for one big natural area. Although Marris belittles wilderness advocates as "romantics" and essentially know-nothings, it is her own ignorance of history and ecology that is demonstrated throughout the book. Sadly, due to her own



lack of scholarship, the author is unaware of how little she really understands about nature.

This book should be read by anyone who cares about the future of the planet. Marris does a great job of summarizing in one compact book the many pros and cons, successes and failures, of efforts to prevent the loss of the vast and amazing array of life on earth. Her final chapter embraced all scales of efforts from back yard to national parks, to my surprise, because the majority of the book implied that many of those efforts are futile. It is this tendency for Marris to overstep her ability to fairly critique the thousands of conservation projects that requires readers to read critically. Readers should note a number of ridiculous suggestions. They should read with an awareness that biased language is used to try to make some arguments stronger than they are. Readers need to beware the author's tendency to rely on outlier, or even contrarian, voices that question well-accepted positions in order to provoke a discussion, while those voices mostly offer little of value as alternatives. There are many sections in this book with useful information that could help us keep life on earth for the future. I am glad she uses 1491 and other great books of the past two decades to reinforce our awareness that pre-European Americas had human influence. to set goals based on what we hope for the future, rather than making a questionable baseline be the goal. I am grateful to Marris for her recommendations that every place that is conserved should have clear goals with measurable criteria - so we can decide if they are working, or not. But Marris shows poor judgment in throwing out the preservation of species as one of those measures. The use of DNA to dictate changes to taxonomy is in its infancy, with tens of thousands of genes yet to be analyzed in even commonly known plants. DNA can't be relied upon to distinguish most of the living earth to the degree that individual animals and plants already can: species recognize compatible DNA and successfully procreate as a result. Neither did Marris gain high ground by using arch and mocking language to try to discredit the people working in conservation biology, exotic invasive plant biology, and other similar efforts to save species. These are the people who will be responsible for carrying forward life on earth despite our monstrous human footprint, and she has done them a disservice with her sarcasm. She discredits herself as well, with her tart language. A good argument stands up without being arrayed with barbs. I greatly appreciated her throwing aside her prickly persona and writing in the first person when she told how moved she was by the sight of the sandhill cranes at dusk. Her acknowledging how that emotion, of awe and delight, matters to us all in our relationship to non-human life, was one saving grace for me. Because of that, I have hope that her future notes on conservation may rise to higher ground. Marris erred by cherry-picking data for effect, resulting in a failure to tell the story correctly. For instance, she dismissed the efforts to reduce pollution from

the rivers that feed into the Chesapeake Bay, when in fact those efforts have already yielded major improvements in the productivity and health of the Bay. Similarly she cited a few outlier sources to conclude that tamarisk isn't such a problem in the west, when in fact tamarisk is a huge problem. It extracts salts which are deposited in its leaf litter leaving a saline environment that other plants can't grow in. This plant - and a couple dozen other exotic invasive plant species - wreck the functioning of many southwestern ecosystems, and greatly reduce the occurrence of many native species of plants and animals. They are serious threats to life on earth. I regret that Marris' survey of the state of restoration biology and conservation biology is biased heavily with stories from "novel ecosystems" where exotic species of plants have taken soil, water, air, and space from the plants that were there, and left the original animals to cope as best they could. When she said these places are more successful "if the only measure is biomass" she failed to do the responsible thing, and to say why other measures are in fact far more important. Marris was dismissive of the vast array of rare plants and animals. She stated exotic species can fulfill "ecosystem services" as well as natives did, though added nuance to that in her last chapter. I have come to wonder if she understands taxonomy, or gardening! Taxonomists and gardeners deeply appreciate the unique qualities of different species, and know that there are no substitutes. Marris' discussion of the biology of islands was flawed also - though like her I am hopeful about the experiments in Hawaii of entire watersheds being managed for restoration or other goals. She noted that islands of native life are surrounded by cities and freeways. In San Diego County the conservation laws create linked open space land, so species or animals and plants can find corridors from one area to another, links to their own kind. That, combined with hard-labor efforts to reduce competition by exotic species (which she said she once did, but seemed to regret) has increased the populations of many native species, contrary to her prediction that most conservation efforts are a useless waste of money. Marris spent precious little time diagnosing why a struggling native plant community loses ground - literally - to certain exotic species. She noticeably failed to note that exotic plants aren't often eaten by herbivores in their new colonies, which means they thrive while the herbivores starve; or that the pathogens or other organisms that keep plants in check in their original locations don't exist in the new ones...until they get there years later. It is at that point, which may or may not ever happen, that a "novel ecosystem" "settles down" as the invasive exotic plant loses its dominance. And this is the worst indictment of Marris' recommendation that all these exotic-dominated landscapes are OK. She stated (without any citations) that forty? sixty? a hundred? years might pass before the exotic species loses its domination. Life on earth doesn't have that kind of time. Birds that live only ten years will be dead before their habitat is once again

viable. Insects that pollinated plants will have vanished in less time. The extinction rate is a hundred times faster and it is being caused by the introduction of invasive species along with other human actions. They are the problem, because we are the problem. Marris needs to acknowledge this fact. Sadly, this book's final recommendations are unlikely to help much life on earth survive, due to its failure to support the solid conservation and restoration work that is doing that job right now. It will surely give a lot of rambunctious gardeners in small projects a sense of worth and fulfillment. I just hope that those gardeners also vote correctly for conservation financing and regulations, and donate whatever they can, labor or money, to support their regional restoration projects, rather than feeling they have done all that they could by rambunctiously gardening their own plot. That plot won't make any difference without the correct big-scale work.

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