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# Once And Future Giants: What Ice Age Extinctions Tell Us About The Fate Of Earth's Largest Animals



## Synopsis

Until about 13,000 years ago, North America was home to a menagerie of massive mammals. Mammoths, camels, and lions walked the ground that has become Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles and foraged on the marsh land now buried beneath Chicago's streets. Then, just as the first humans reached the Americas, these Ice Age giants vanished forever. In *Once and Future Giants*, science writer Sharon Levy digs through the evidence surrounding Pleistocene large animal ("megafauna") extinction events worldwide, showing that understanding this history--and our part in it--is crucial for protecting the elephants, polar bears, and other great creatures at risk today. These surviving relatives of the Ice Age beasts now face the threat of another great die-off, as our species usurps the planet's last wild places while driving a warming trend more extreme than any in mammalian history. Deftly navigating competing theories and emerging evidence, *Once and Future Giants* examines the extent of human influence on megafauna extinctions past and present, and explores innovative conservation efforts around the globe. The key to modern-day conservation, Levy suggests, may lie fossilized right under our feet.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

No one with an interest in the natural world can fail to be captivated by the giant mammals that recently walked the earth. Whether it's the woolly rhino, giant ground sloth or the iconic mammoth, these were amazing beasts. A bit of reflection will show that we are still surrounded by megafauna. Lions, ostriches, hippos and horses are equally strange and wonderful. Sharon Levy's book begins

and ends with the mammoth. These elephants covered much of the earth, a few of them lasting into the age of the pyramids. There is still tremendous dispute over what caused their end. There's no doubt that humans played a role, but the extent of that role isn't clear. To some, it was humans all the way: to others, humans played only a minor part. In the case of more recent extinctions--the moa, the thylacines, the dodo--there's no doubt at all. The central section of the book is concerned with the preservation and the restoration of wild habitats. The most controversial of these approaches is 'rewilding', the re-creation of near Pleistocene environments using relatives of extinct animals. The more enthusiastic proponents would like to see lions, elephants and camels restored to the American west. As the reader may expect, there's no political support for such an approach. Accidental forms of rewilding have already happened: wild horses returned to America just a few hundred years ago. Camels were introduced to Australia even more recently. In both cases, the absence of predators has caused populations to exceed the carrying capacity of the land. Levy illustrates how our fear of other top predators (we're top predators ourselves) may doom these approaches. Top predators not only do the obvious by culling herds of large herbivores. They also control smaller predators who would otherwise decimate many smaller species. We have made a world with little remaining room for them. There is a theme to this very good book. That theme shows how interrelated and how integrated an ecosystem must be. The explosion of one animal (elk in Yellowstone, for example) can impede dozens of other species. The re-introduction of the wolf has helped to restore the aspen--that's not an obvious outcome. The explosion of humans and our enormous impact on the environment now presents us with the problem of how we might save the megafauna. In doing so, perhaps we save ourselves as well.

I first read about Paul Martin's mega-fauna overkill theory in the mid 90's and it was electric in its elegance. The correlating arrival of humans and mass extinction of large animals is strikingly consistent. Since then his theories and the idea of missing mega-faunal pieces in our landscapes has been handled many times in books like *The Ghosts of Evolution: Nonsensical Fruit, Missing Partners, and Other Ecological Anachronisms*, *The Call of Distant Mammoths: Why The Ice Age Mammals Disappeared* and *Twilight of the Mammoths: Ice Age Extinctions and the Rewilding of America (Organisms and Environments)*, but none is more succinct in connecting the extinctions at the end of the last ice age to our current ideas of conservation as this book. The author's writing is clear and enjoyable to read. (on a side note, she has some of the best chapter sequels I've seen.) Her exploration of the Overkill debate and Pleistocene extinctions seems even-handed, perhaps leaning in favor of Overkill as a leading factor. She skillfully builds a foundation of understanding

before moving into the current day conservation implications. It is a perfect layman's primer for the Pleistocene extinctions and the ecological results. Perhaps the biggest thing that earlier books didn't have was the Yellowstone wolf reintroduction. I don't think anyone foresaw the profound changes that introduction of a missing ecosystem component could have. The changes of biodiversity and plant communities were shocking and have made the idea of reintroducing absent megafauna even more vivid. Levy does a good job of covering this ongoing experiment. Also, I am impressed by the many other real world examples Levy provides to explore rewilding. From condors to tortoises to wild mustangs she shows the potential and issues of megafaunal reintroduction or loss. Also, along the way she does an excellent job of describing a multitude of issues of ecology like island biogeography, the importance of wildlife corridors and the malleability of ecosystems in general. Perhaps this book's greatest contribution is connecting the extinctions of the past to the realities of current conservation efforts. The bulk of this book has been covered in other books and articles, but this book can stand proudly amongst them. If you are a fan of nature or ecology and haven't read about overkill or rewilding, you need to read this book. While Overkill may ultimately be unprovable and rewilding may be politically impossible to implement, the concepts are profoundly eye-opening. I highly recommend this book.

This was a very interesting book ranging from an exploration of theories about the causes of the extinction of the large mammals of the Pleistocene to the possibilities of bringing them back via substitution or genetic engineering. The primary locations examined are North America and Australia, but other areas are also examined. The hope is that we can learn from past extinctions to prevent species currently in danger from also becoming extinct. Since I work in Yellowstone much of the year, I found a short section about wolves and elk in that area particularly interesting. Possibly the book will be updated before publication, but the advance copy contains some information which may no longer be accurate. Research published last fall questions earlier studies cited in the book that the reintroduction of wolves has improved the growth of aspen due to less elk browsing. The book also mentions that the elk population on the park's northern range has been declining an average of 8% annually since wolf reintroduction, but the count released last month showed a large 25% drop to a record low elk population. In part due to that and the lingering issue of delisting wolves, conflict is actually increasing in the area and the Montana House took the absurd action last week of overwhelmingly voting to nullify the Endangered Species Act. Things aren't looking too good at the moment for Future Giants in that area, or even for the predators already there. Despite these reservations, I found the broad subject of the book very interesting and expect that I will

reread it someday. I still haven't made up my mind on what caused those Pleistocene extinctions.

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