



End of nature

Description

In what sense is nature ended? It is not just that natural environments have been polluted, over-managed, or subjected to human control, but nature has changed its *meaning*. This question provides a further touch point for nature and semiotics.

Writing in the 1980s, environmental writer Bill McKibben said of nature that it "is now a category like the defense budget or the minimum wage, a problem we must work out. This in itself changes its meaning completely, and changes our reaction to it" (1126).

He advances a couple of poignant illustrations of this semiotic shift. The first draws on our aversion to things that we know will end before their time.

"The end of nature probably also makes us reluctant to attach ourselves to its remnants for the same reason that we usually don't choose friends from among the terminally ill" (1126). McKibben chose not to know too much about vegetative die back, and other problems within the natural world afflicted by humans: "I like the woods best in winter when it is harder to tell what might be dying" (1126). If he knew what sick trees look like then he would see them everywhere.

Then there is the energy spent on getting out of things, of diminishing commitments rather than sustaining or struggling with them. As marital divorce is so widely accepted, people put their energies into preparing for independence, rather than being *interdependent* (think of Brexit!). As in resignation McKibben laments, "There is no future in loving nature" (1127).

Then we will forget how people used to think about fish and other wildlife before the expansion of genetic engineering and industrial scale farming: "The loss of memory will be the eternal loss of meaning" (1127).

I was alerted to McKibben in a pop interview by Bill Maher ([YouTube](#)). His insights are pertinent in light of the appointment of a "climate change denier" as head of the US Environmental Protection Agency ([Guardian](#)). Also see <https://350.org/>.



Reference

- McKibben, Bill. 2002. The end of nature. In Robert Finch, and John Elder (eds.), *The Norton Book of Nature Writing: College Edition*: 1120-1130. New York: W.W. Norton.

Note

- The image was taken in the Monaco aquarium.

Category

1. Nature

Tags

1. environment
2. environmentalism
3. meaning
4. semiotics

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