**Attenborough, David. A Life on Our Planet. Ebury Publishing. Kindle Edition**

Conclusion

I was born in another time. I don’t mean this metaphorically, but literally. I arrived in this world during a period geologists call the Holocene, and I will leave it – *as will every one of us alive today* – in the Anthropocene, the time of humans.

The term Anthropocene was proposed in 2016 by a group of eminent geologists. Dividing the Earth’s history into named periods has long been geological practice. Each is recognised by characteristics that distinguish the rocks of that particular age from all others – the absence of some fossil species that had flourished earlier and the appearance of new ones. That will certainly be the case in the rocks that are forming today. Not only will they contain fewer species than the rocks that preceded them but they will contain markers that are completely new – fragments of plastic, plutonium from nuclear activity, and a worldwide distribution of the bones of domesticated chickens.

The geologists suggested that this new epoch might begin in the 1950s and that it should be called the Anthropocene, since it is the human species more than any other that is determining its character. What for the geologists was a name produced by scientific routine has now, however, become to many others a vivid expression of the alarming change that now faces us. We have become a global force with such power that we are affecting the entire planet. The Anthropocene, in fact, could prove to be a uniquely brief period in geological history and one that ends in the ultimate disappearance of human civilisation.

It need not be so.

The advent of the Anthropocene could yet mark the beginning of a new and sustainable relationship between ourselves and the planet. It could be a time in which we learn how to work with nature rather than against it, a time in which there would no longer be any great distinction between the natural and the managed, for we would become the attentive stewards of the entire Earth, calling upon nature’s extraordinary resilience to help us bring its biodiversity back from the brink. In the end, the question of which version of the Anthropocene is about to unfold, is up to us.

Human beings may be ingenious but they are also quarrelsome. Our history books have been dominated by stories of wars, of struggles for dominance between nations. But we cannot continue in this way. The dangers that now face the Earth are global and can only be dealt with if nations sink their differences and unite to act globally. There are in fact precedents of our managing to do so. In 1986, the whaling nations of the world got together and decided that the slaughter of whales of all kinds had to end if these extraordinary and wonderful animals were not to be exterminated. Some delegates may have agreed to stop the hunt because whales were, by then, so reduced in numbers that it was no longer economic to pursue them. *But others certainly did so because of pleas from conservationists and scientists.* The decision was by no means unanimous. And there are still continuing arguments. But in 1994, 50 million square kilometres of the Southern Ocean was declared an International Whale Sanctuary. Today, as a result of these restrictions, whales have increased to numbers that have not been seen in living memory. And an important and influential factor in the complex workings of the ocean restored to something like its proper position.

In central Africa, where in the 1970s only 300 mountain gorillas survived, cross-border agreements were eventually made between a number of African nations and now there are over a thousand of these magnificent creatures, thanks to the hard work and bravery of generations of local rangers. So, it is within our power to come together internationally, if we want to.

Now, however, we must make agreements that apply not just to a single group of animals but to the whole of the natural world. It will take the labours of countless committees and conferences, and the signing of innumerable international treaties. *The work has already started, organised by the United Nations. Huge conferences involving tens of thousands of people are at work.*

One series is dealing with problems concerning the alarming rate that our planet is warming which could have such widespread and devastating consequences. Another series is charged with protecting the biodiversity on which the whole interconnecting web of life depends.

The task could hardly be more daunting and we have to support it in every way we can. We have to urge our politicians, locally, nationally and internationally, to come to some agreement and sometimes subordinate our national interest in support of the bigger and wider benefit. The future of humanity depends upon the success of these meetings. We often talk of saving the planet, but the truth is that we must do these things to save ourselves.

With or without us, the wild will return. Evidence of this is no more dramatic than that to be seen in the ruins of Pripyat, the model city that had to be abandoned when the Chernobyl nuclear reactor exploded. When you step outside the dark and empty corridors of one of its deserted apartment blocks, you are greeted by a most surprising sight. In the 34 years since the evacuation, a forest has taken over the deserted city. Shrubs have broken up the concrete and ivy pulled apart the bricks. Roofs sag under the weight of accumulating vegetation, and saplings of poplar and aspen have burst through the pavements. The gardens, the parks and the avenues are now shaded by the canopies of oaks, pines and maples, 20 feet above the ground. Beneath, there is a strange under-storey of unkempt ornamental roses and fruit trees. The football field, which 34 years ago served as a landing pad for military helicopters sent to evacuate the city’s inhabitants, is now covered by a thicket of young trees. The wild has reclaimed its territory.

The land including the town and the ruined reactor has now been designated a sanctuary for animals that are rare elsewhere. Biologists have placed camera-traps at the windows of the town and recorded images of thriving populations of foxes, elk, deer, wild boar, bison, brown bear and racoon dogs. Some years ago, a few individuals of the nearly extinct Przewalski’s horse were released there, and their numbers are now increasing. Even wolves have colonised the area, safe from the guns of hunters.

It seems that, however grave our mistakes, nature will be able to overcome them, given the chance. The living world has survived mass extinctions several times before. But we humans cannot assume that we will do the same. We have come as far as we have because we are the cleverest creatures to have ever lived on Earth. But if we are to continue to exist, we will require more than intelligence. We will require wisdom.

Homo sapiens, the wise human being, must now learn from its mistakes and live up to its name. We who are alive today have the formidable task of making sure that our species does so. We must not give up hope. We have all the tools we need, the thoughts and ideas of billions of remarkable minds and the immeasurable energies of nature to help us in our work. And we have one more thing – an ability, perhaps unique among the living creatures on the planet – to imagine a future and work towards achieving it.

We can yet make amends, manage our impact, change the direction of our development and once again become a species in harmony with nature. All we require is the will. The next few decades represent a final opportunity to build a stable home for ourselves and restore the rich, healthy and wonderful world that we inherited from our distant ancestors.

Our future on the planet, the only place as far as we know where life of any kind exists, is at stake.

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