Science & Technology

The World According to Pimm

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Stuart Pimm, a biodiversity expert and professor of ecology at Columbia, says that by the middle of the twenty-first century, 50 percent of the earth's species could be on a path to extinction.

Pimm argues the point in his new book, *The World According to Pimm: A Scientist Audits the Earth* (McGraw-Hill, 2001), by taking readers on a tour from Hawaii to the Amazon, Australia to the Everglades, showing how human activity has changed the natural world.

Pimm believes scientists have a crucial role in measuring human impact on natural environments, understanding their effects on the variety of life, and then addressing the problems. His work focuses on three urgent goals: to document where species are facing extinction, determine what the processes of extinction are, and figure out what practical solutions can arrest what is an otherwise irreversible trend. Pimm says he is hopeful that if something is done soon to conserve the world's 25 "hot spots" (locales where half of the world's species variety can be found), a mass extinction can be avoided.

Pimm is a senior research scientist at the Center for Environmental Research and Conservation (CERC) at Columbia's Earth Institute, as well as a member of the Arts and Sciences faculty in the newly formed Department of Ecology, Evolution, and Environmental Biology—or E3B. The new department offers a bachelor's degree in environmental biology, a master's degree in conservation biology, and a Ph.D. in ecology and evolutionary biology. There are also certificate programs in conservation biology for graduate students in the social sciences and in environmental policy for doctoral candidates in ecology and evolution.

The degree programs, which began before E3B existed, were initially administered by CERC and build on CERC's goal of educating a new generation of scientists and practitioners to advance the understanding of the earth's biological systems and the alteration of its ecosystems.

“Conservationists will need to be as sophisticated in delivering their knowledge to the policy arena as they are in their research techniques,” says Pimm. “Our job is to equip the next generation with world-wise skills so that they can tackle real conservation issues around the globe.”

Pimm’s current research includes studies of endangered species and ecosystem restoration in the Florida Everglades, a setting he has turned into a classroom during spring break when he leads students through the wetland wilderness to identify birds and see firsthand the area’s biological diversity.

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