

# Catastrophic Thinking

Thomas Martin

a review of

*Catastrophic Thinking: Extinction and the Value of Diversity from Darwin to the Anthropocene* by David Sepkoski. University of Chicago Press 2020

*Catastrophic Thinking* is not an optimistic book. However, it is relentlessly realistic.

Sepkoski is a professor at the University of Illinois specializing in transnational history of biological, environmental, and information sciences in cultural context.

His goal is to explore the historical trends over the past two centuries that have led to a realization that the planet's biological and cultural diversity are in mortal danger. It began with Darwin, proceeded through the catastrophic 20<sup>th</sup> century, fear of The Bomb, and recent discoveries about past extinctions.

As early as the 1920s, scientists began to see that balance or homeostasis is essential to the long-term survival of the biosphere and that human activity was an increasing threat to that balance.

Peter Kropotkin and Murray Bookchin, among others, have always been a step ahead of that realization.

The author gives little credit to eco-feminists and eco-anarchists or to non-Western thinkers and activists (no anarchists or feminists appear in the index), but every page implies, without saying so directly, that capitalism, domination and hierarchy are the sustaining and structural culprits.

Humans are, Sepkoski warns, the asteroid and the dinosaur. He recognizes that the asteroid is a minuscule wealthy and powerful fraction of humanity, the "one percent," and that the dinosaur is all the rest of us. We can now easily place the blame, but if we don't act, we'll get the extinction we all fear.

# fifth Estate

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