



## **Naturalist**

*Edward O. Wilson*

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## **Naturalist** Edward O. Wilson

In *Naturalist*, Wilson describes for the first time both his growth as a scientist and the evolution of the science he has helped define. He traces the trajectory of his life - from a childhood spent exploring the Gulf Coast of Alabama and Florida to life as a tenured professor at Harvard - detailing how his youthful fascination with nature blossomed into a lifelong calling. He recounts with drama and wit the adventures of his days as a student at the University of Alabama and his four decades at Harvard University, where he has achieved renown as both teacher and researcher. As the narrative of Wilson's life unfolds, the reader is treated to an inside look at the origin and development of ideas that guide today's biological research. Theories that are now widely accepted in the scientific world were once untested hypotheses emerging from one man's broad-gauged studies. Throughout *Naturalist*, we see Wilson's mind and energies constantly striving to help establish many of the central principles of the field of evolutionary biology. The story of Edward O. Wilson's life provides fascinating insights into the making of a scientist and a valuable look at some of the most thought-provoking ideas of our time.

## **Naturalist Details**

Date : Published August 1st 1994 by Island Press (first published January 1st 1994)

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Author : Edward O. Wilson

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## **From Reader Review Naturalist for online ebook**

### **Emorden says**

Interesting book about a great evolutionary biologist

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### **Juliet Wilson says**

This beautifully written, fascinating scientific memoir from Edward O Wilson outlines his development as a scientist, from early influences (including youthful nature studies, the church and the Boy Scouts) to his greatest works as a scientist.

Wilson is an eloquent champion of biodiversity and conservation and is the world's greatest expert on ants and a pioneer in the fields of biogeography and sociobiology. Not surprisingly therefore these memoirs are wide ranging in their scope, covering the biology of ants, conflicts between field biologists (of which Wilson is one) and molecular biologists, the importance of islands in biogeography and the evolution of the study of sociobiology in the animal kingdom from ants to primates (and the controversies that arose when those thoughts about animal sociobiology came up against human biology).

This is a totally fascinating (and very readable) book for anyone interested in our relationship with the natural world and in how academic science works.

Naturalist by Edward O Wilson published by Penguin.

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### **Stuart Malcolm says**

Wilson is an excellent writer and his descriptions of how he became interested in nature and how he retained that excitement throughout his career are absorbing. His passion for science and his delight in new discoveries shines through the book. It loses a star for the chapter on the sociobiological 'controversy' which is a little dull and for those of us who aren't in academia more than a little silly - we would have just sent the protagonists to bed without any dinner.

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### **Bill Yates says**

The book is basically the autobiography of an accomplished scientist and intellectual. Dr. Wilson never talks down to his intended audience, the general reader and layman, yet he avoids being at all snobbish. His humility is evident throughout the book. I was especially intrigued by the chapter on The Sociobiology Controversy. "Human beings inherit a propensity to acquire behavior and social structures... The defining traits include division of labor between the sexes, bonding between parents and children, heightened altruism toward closest kin, incest avoidance, other forms of ethical behavior, suspicion of strangers, tribalism, dominance order within limiting resources." While the genetic basis for those behaviors makes perfect sense to me, at the time of the publication of Dr. Wilson's book (Sociobiology, 1975), there was a firestorm of

controversy, especially from Marxist scientists and other left-leaning intellectuals at Harvard and elsewhere. The nature-nurture debate was at the time leaning towards nurture, and the implications of the controversy spilled over into politics. The controversy was especially relevant to me, because I have given thought to many of the issues in the past. In a journal entry, dated 30 November 2015, I wrote:

"In nature we find many examples of the instinct of males to pass on their unique genes. I think that men are structured in the same way. After all, we are a product of evolution, and biological evolution has worked extremely well, through survival of the fittest and natural selection, to produce the wonderful diversity of life on this planet. It may seem like a leap to infer that monogamy is the outcome of the aforementioned instincts, but an intelligent person can fill in the gaps. We have two basic instincts: personal survival and propagation of the species. The instinct for personal survival leads to the need to pass on one's unique genes. Doing so is a kind of survival. Thus civilization has, by social evolution, produced monogamy and the structure of the nuclear family. Marriage is basically a kind of contract between a man and a woman. The woman agrees to pass on the genes of her husband (exclusively), and the man agrees to protect and feed the wife and the offspring. Of course, there is mutual sharing of tasks, especially in the modern world. The man and the woman agree to provide mutual comfort and companionship "until death do us part".

"Of course, there are exceptions to the prevailing social structures, among both animals and humans. Those are notable mostly because they are the exceptions."

The controversies have not diminished. Everyone has an opinion about sociobiology, whether they realize it or not. We need only look to debates about the structure of family, gender roles, and sexual mores to find many hot topics. Often it is a split between liberals and conservatives, but not always. Wilson's thesis would seem to appeal to social conservatives, but some on the far right will not even consider biological evolution as having merit as a theory. That effectively leaves them outside the discussion, at least from a scientific perspective.

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### **Graham Sommers says**

Fantastic writing coupled with wonder for the world

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### **Courtney Holt says**

I have to admit, I wasn't expecting much when I first started reading this book. I mean, it's an autobiography of a biologist. Even though I am a biologist, I still expected to have to tape my eyes open to get through it. However, I was pleasantly surprised - this book is amazing! It was hard for me to put it down. His style of writing is so effortless to read and his life story is so interesting. You probably have to be at least a little interested in natural history/biology to appreciate and enjoy the book. Overall, he seems very humble about the huge contributions he made to the field of biology. Although I'm sure I learned this at some point, I had no idea he had such a large part in developing the ideas of ecological release, competitive exclusion, island biogeography, and the field of sociobiology. And all of this came about essentially because of his childhood experiences (along with his immense intellect and dedication, of course). Overall, this book is very inspiring, extremely well-written, and a must-read for anyone with a passion for natural history.

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## **Jerome Lusa says**

This review was based on the Books On Tape edition, ISBN 0736631364, published 1/1/1996.

Edward O. Wilson is a renowned biologist and two-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction for his comprehensive writings on the biology of ants and of the theory of sociobiology. In *Naturalist*, Wilson traces his roots as a scientist from his boyhood explorations of the South Florida coastline to the halls of Harvard University. He outlines his personal development from observer to cataloger to theorist to synthesizer and ultimately to conservationist.

Wilson interweaves personal anecdotes with a chronicle of his development as a scientist to give a detailed insight into the making of a world-class scientist. His writing style is captivating and the tapes are engaging in spite of the inanimate rendition by the Books On Tape reader. One will want an atlas at hand, especially for the early chapters, as Wilson delights in describing the many locations around the world where he conducted his research. He has been to sites in the southeastern United States, the Caribbean, Central America, Australia and Indonesia.

There are two main threads in the book and they occur in sequence. The first follows the development of Wilson's academic career in roughly chronological order. The second is a more specific discourse on the development of the theory of sociobiology and the academic in-fighting that it spawned during the 1970's. Where the latter thread delves into the personalities of those who opposed Wilson's theory, the book suffers as an apology for Wilson's perspective that belittles the grand ideas he had put forth. It seems that Wilson needed to appeal to rhetoric in addition to offering great science because those that objected to his theory did so for social reasons with rhetoric rather than science.

The book is a Who's Who of evolutionary biologists and entomologists, and could be read as a quick overview of the development of those fields through the 20th century. Wilson took great care to give credit where it was due, whether to mentors, peers, understudies or detractors. He was at the cutting edge of a rapidly developing area of biology and his story offers a good deal of insight into the personalities, careers and discoveries of his time.

*Naturalist* gives an outline of Wilson's theory of sociobiology and in various places shows where his experiences lead to the formation of the theory. The immense importance of Wilson's discovery can be shown by placing it in the sequence of discoveries initiated by Charles Darwin.

Darwin's theory of evolution was, by Darwin's own admission, missing an explanation of exactly how traits were passed from parent to offspring. Gregor Mendel developed a theory of inheritance that, when cemented by the discovery of the roles of chromosomes in heredity by Thomas Hunt Morgan, completed Darwin's theory. W.D. Hamilton took evolutionary theory to a higher magnitude of order by showing that altruism, which had become a thorn in the side of Darwinian theory, has a genetic basis founded on the degree of similarity between the genes of related individuals, and is therefore subject to evolutionary development. Where Darwinian theory explains evolution at the scale of individual creatures, Hamilton added a social dimension to evolution. Wilson's theory expands our understanding of evolution to include general social behaviors in terms of genes, accounting for culture in the process. A reader with further interest in the Wilson's theory will want to read the eponymous book, *Sociobiology*, and *On Human Nature* for which Wilson won his first Pulitzer Prize for nonfiction in 1974.

Wilson identifies a categorization of scientists as either brilliant or driven, and places himself squarely in the

latter group. He notes that brilliant scientists make breakthroughs while driven ones produce syntheses. If his writings are any indication, he is clearly a driven type for his syntheses have made him the spokesman for the scientific movement of evolutionary biology and the social movement of conservationism.

Written by a two-time Pulitzer Prize winning author who coincidentally has fleshed out the second-order restatement of Darwin's theory of evolution, *Naturalist* will put the reader/listener in a front row seat at the cutting edge of human knowledge.

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### **Simeon says**

Finished "Naturalist" - E.O. Wilson - A/UN - Languid telling, interesting autobio, lots of college stuff - elegant writer 3.5/5

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### **Nola says**

This book illustrates the amazing breadth of E.O. Wilson's work. The format of an autobiography allows for inclusion of everything on which Wilson worked, thought, and collaborated. He tells how each of his ideas and studies was inspired and developed, and includes the context of the state of knowledge and politics of the times. He explains conflicts with other scientists that arose on many issues, with an uncanny ability to describe other people's mannerisms. I had no idea that ecology and biology had been so controversial. Reading these personal stories behind developing ecological principles is a good way to make them memorable. There is really more to be gained from this book than can be absorbed in one reading.

Even though Wilson writes about his childhood, his father's alcoholism emerges later as an afterthought. Another person might have written an entire book about their struggle to overcome that kind of early life, but instead Wilson's focus is on his passion for biology and barely touches on what others might have seen as difficulties. His passion infused his early life with joy and his later life with unbelievable achievement.

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### **Billy says**

An excellent account of the evolution of a scientist from his deep south Southern Baptist roots to his role as champion of the preservation of biodiversity. As Wilson concludes, "My truths, three in number, are the following: first, humanity is ultimately the product of biological evolution; second, the diversity of life is the cradle and greatest natural heritage of the human species; and third, philosophy and religion make little sense without taking into account these first two conceptions"

The dustup over Wilson's concept of sociobiology is well explained, as are population biology and biogeography. Most interesting are the accounts of those aspects of personality that drive's the authors quest for scientific explanation. The child exploring the diversity of life in southern swamps lives on in the now elderly scientist.

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## **Julian says**

Wilson's book is really spectacular. It is a humble autobiography of a man who achieved really incredible heights in his career. The best part of the book for me was reading his descriptions of major periods of study and research in his career as a professor at Harvard University. His tales are understandable to the lay-man and thus incredibly interesting as it is a window into how tenured professors operate.

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## **Cassandralynn says**

I have followed this guy since I met him on a plane at 19 on my way to a conference where he happened to be the keynote speaker. He is a true scientist, crawling through the grass and on the ground chasing bugs. His career has more highlights than many scientists could claim in two lifetimes. This book shares just a few. I'm sure it has inspired many people, including me.

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## **Vincent says**

The book I chose to read was *Naturalist*, by Edward O. Wilson. I chose this book because I was interested to learn about the lifestyle of a scientist, and all the crazy things that they would go through for the sake of knowledge. Mr. Wilson was a well-educated and disciplined person, he spent quite a lot of his time in early years transferring between prestigious schools. He got his love for science from all time he spent as a kid alone in the woods and on beaches, fascinated by critters he would attempt to collect. When he was young his parents separated, and decided the best way for him to be raised was a military school. So they sent him to the Gulf Coast Military Academy, where he learned to be focused and mature. Years later he attended the University of Alabama to work towards his Bachelor's degree in science. Skip forward some more years and he has been accepted to Harvard to work towards his Ph.D. Not surprisingly he will end up becoming a professor at this prestigious school at the age of only twenty-six. With the funding of Harvard he would proceed to conduct all sorts of studies on small life forms around the world, completely interesting tasks like climbing mountains, traversing islands and most interestingly gassing an entire set of islets to wipe them temporarily clear of life. I would only recommend this book to someone interested in the process of scientific discovery, with a complex vocabulary and a grasp of scientific terms who enjoys learning from someone's life experiences.

The author's style was quite intriguing, since he is an educated man with a very intellectual position you would imagine his writing was reflective of his job. This proves to be true, as he describes things with a broad and advanced vocabulary, I often had to look words he used up. For example he uses plenty of scientific terms I would assume most people do not know. His writing paints a clear image in my mind, however some of his metaphors were a little weird. He described a jellyfish in the beginning chapter of the book, and from his description I knew exactly what he was looking at. I enjoyed his style, some of his writing was a little conservative and his way of describing even the simplest things while keeping to the point kept me interested. I would recommend his style for an audience that enjoys detail and advancing their vocabulary. The only thing I can compare his style to is that of a textbook author combined with someone like Anne Rice, who puts quite a lot of detail into her work.

Some of the author's experiences I could relate to, I've spent time in the woods before and I can share some of the feelings he had for people in positions of authority; such as the different teachers he learned from and

worked beside. However do to the time gap and difference in interests between us, some of his life was foreign to me. The author developed himself very well, explaining his feelings and how he grew from the events in his life. Other characters were described thoroughly by the author if they were a character of importance in his life. He provides plenty of details about other characters, including his own opinion and observations into it. When describing some of the other professors and people he has worked with he would detail how they carried themselves and how they worked with his broad vocabulary. You can form your own opinions on some characters, however I feel as if we are intending to accept his opinion as our own because it's intertwined into the development of the characters. He described a commander he came into contact with during his time at the Academy as an unintelligent drunk, because that was how he saw and viewed them. The author describes each person with detail, often using interesting comparisons to set up how they look or act. Like I mentioned earlier, some of his comparisons were a little weird, often specific to things during his time or in his life we most likely wouldn't understand.

Most of this book kept my attention, because he mostly spent enough time on each event and subject to keep you interesting without it getting tiresome. There were some cases where a something was drawn out for too long, and I lost interest. There was also a few cases where the subject itself just wasn't quite interesting, however most of these were personal to me and only a few were the cause of bad writing and lack of content. Everything in the story was in its chronological order, this kept the book interesting throughout the story because it helped you understand how he grew as a person from childhood to adult. I found the book to be very interesting during the phases of his childhood and his education, as everything was fast and contributed to his development. I especially enjoyed reading about his time in military school, not only was it much different from my schooling but it was also different because of the cultural differences during that time. The book slowed down during some points of his research out in the field, and occasionally his studies in his office were slow when he was describing how he conducted his work. The themes of this novel are to follow your passion, and hard work pays off. I was satisfied with the how the themes were presented, through the author's thoughts and feelings. I learned quite a lot through this book, I learned about the economy of his day, the state of the natural world, how the world was advancing in and treating science, and life lessons from the author's experiences. Every triumph and defeat the author experienced taught me a little about how I should respond to events in life, and changed my view on some things a little. I highly enjoyed this part of the book, it was one of my favorite things about reading it.

I thought this book was a pleasure to read, although a little bit of a chore at some points. It's worth enduring any confusion and boredom to get through this story, however that's only for the people that this book would interest. I would have to recommend this book to anyone interested in science, or who enjoys learning from other people's experiences in life. I would give this book to someone any day, I think it would make a weird present for a holiday or birthday. This book doesn't really remind me of anything else I have read previously, I tend to stay away from memoirs and autobiographies. After finishing this book I am going to read a suspense or mystery novel, like I am interested in reading the Davinci Code by Robert Langdon.

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## **Benjaminxjackson says**

In his essays, the french philosopher Montaigne suggests that education be based on Plutarch's Lives, which are biographies of historical figures. After reading Wilson's autobiography, I can see how an argument could be made for a similar approach to education today.

Wilson's book, while a biography of a man, is a biography of ideas and science through the twentieth century. While the book follows the chronology of Wilson's life, he breaks out of the timeline of his life as he discusses ideas ranging from entomology to biogeography to sociobiology.



Still, readers should not let that list of lengthy words put them off from reading the book. While Wilson expects a certain level of education from his readers (and the ability to use a dictionary), he writes about these ideas in a way that makes them accessible. Throughout his book, Wilson gives credit to his collaborators and insists that he is no genius. Instead he attributes his success in the sciences to hard work, creative thinking, and the chance to work with good people.

For readers who want to dig deeper into some of the technical information, Wilson has footnotes in many of the chapters that refer not only to his works, but also the work of other scientists who both agreed and disagreed with him.

Wilson the man is as interesting as the ideas that he discusses. He describes his childhood, which included a stint in military school that he says shaped his outlook on work, a troubled homelife that included an alcoholic father who committed suicide, and time in the Boy Scouts that shows how training for future careers can come from unexpected places. He also reveals that he is 'a bit of an arachnophobe,' which I would have thought would be impossible for an entomologist.

He reflects on how his family history (and everyone else's) is carried forward by individuals and how it changes and evolves. He also, perhaps unwittingly, talks about how human history and culture is carried forward and in a constant state of change. Wilson ends his book with a discussion of biodiversity and a call to action for environmental preservation. Wilson makes a compelling argument that we need to do more to look after the planet we live on.

This is a book that has an index which includes entries for 'newspaper routes,' 'population biology,' 'fistfights,' and 'molecular biology at Harvard.' It describes how Wilson created population biology experiments in the Everglades by fumigating small islands, and how he dealt with accusations that he was a Nazi because of his sociobiology writing. It also includes such gems as "In the natural world, beautiful usually means deadly. Beautiful plus a casual demeanor *always* means deadly." I think there is a life lesson there.

I would recommend this book people interested in science, the scientific method, the history and philosophy of science, intellectual history, and for those who are interested in success but not interested in reading another "think positive!" book.

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### **John Nelson says**

This book is the autobiography of one of the great scientists of the twentieth century - by turns wry and perceptive, on the whole it's an enjoyable and worthwhile read.

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