## Review

## The human predicament and how we got there

Paul and Anne Ehrlich have set themselves an ambitious task with this book, sifting through theories of evolution, culture, human behaviour and ecology to explain 'how one species, *Homo sapiens*, has become so powerful that it can significantly undermine the ability of Earth's environment to support much of life – including our own'.

Throughout *The Dominant Animal*, the authors try to bring a broader perspective to the science of human evolution.
Cultural evolution and environment, they argue, are more important than genetic evolution in understanding the sources of our 'environment-modifying' behaviour, which has led to global warming and other problems.

They begin with Charles Darwin and his theory of evolution by natural selection and Gregor Mendel's discovery of the unit of heredity – genes – reminding us of how these discoveries completely revolutionised humanity's view of itself and the world around us. However, the authors also show how simple models of cultural evolution based on genetic/Darwinian principles fail to

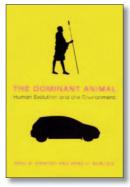
capture human evolution's 'dynamics and complexity'.

The Ehrlichs also turn their attention to the evolution of religion, and the futility of categorising humanity according to race. They argue that, 'although "races" based on arbitrarily selected, mostly visual, characteristics have long been defined or treated as social or political units, there are no such units biologically'.

A thoughtful discussion of the notion of natural capital points out that 'unless the ability of natural capital to deliver essential ecosystem goods and services can be maintained, economic growth will come to an end' – an obvious point that economists and politicians often overlook!

Paul Ehrlich was also the author of *The Population Bomb* so it's no surprise that the issue of over-population as the driving force behind most of our environmental and resource-related problems is a central tenet of the book.

'Even though virtually every environmental and social problem nationally and globally is exacerbated today by continued population growth,' warn the authors, 'the topic of human



The Dominant Animal
Human Evolution and the Environment
Paul R. Ehrlich and Anne H. Ehrlich

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numbers is absent not only from policy discussions in the US but also largely from public discourse'.

Is the human race doomed? Not necessarily, say the authors, because 'the qualities that made it possible for us to become the dominant animal could now be put to use in creating a sustainable future for ourselves and the rest of the living world'.



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