

ship in that movement for some years now, mostly to open the way for young people who will be fighting this fight until they're my age or beyond. The passion and insight in these pages give me hope, as always, that the fight will keep growing, encompassing more and different kinds of people, finding new openings to the hearts and souls of our fellow human beings.

But I'm also heartened by the sheer, dogged commitment to observing the world in all its beauty, even as that beauty is compromised. The planet we were given will never be more intact or whole than it is at this moment, and one of our jobs as human beings (and surely as writers) is simply to bear witness to it in all its glory, mystery, buzzing cruelty.

I am so grateful to the writers in this book and to the thought that I am part of their company of observers, thinkers, doers. The world is in a tough place, but it doesn't lack for witnesses and partisans!

Introduction

How has growing up in a mutable physical, biological, and social world shaped the lives and thoughts of today's young adults? What do members of this generation have to say about their challenges, hopes, fears, and sources of resilience for the unpredictable future? Shrinking Arctic ice caps and healing ozone holes, dwindling biodiversity and expanding environmental education, ocean acidification and advancing global monitoring technology, and intransigent climate change denial amid burgeoning climate activism have been formative realities in their early lives. The essays collected here are composed by a particular set of insightful young adults: talented writers belonging to a generation that grew to maturity inundated with news and personal experiences of unprecedented environmental change. Together, they attempt to answer what it means—to them—to come of age in a time of shifting expectations and environmental crisis.

Humans have shaped the natural world deliberately and incidentally for millennia, but previous generations perceived environmental problems as primarily local—clearing of a forest, draining of a wetland, extirpation of a game

fish—and retained confidence that human damage would heal over time through nature's resilience. But by the late twentieth century, traces of human influence reached everywhere, from heavy metal pollution in undersea sediments to CFCs in the stratosphere. In 1989, before many of our contributors were born, Bill McKibben wrote in *The End of Nature* that human influence on the planet has grown ubiquitous; pristine wilderness no longer exists. To McKibben, contamination of the upper atmosphere with anthropogenic greenhouse gases is the ultimate sign of nature's end, or at least the end of humanity's ancient relationship with the natural world: "We have not ended rainfall or sunlight; in fact, rainfall and sunlight may become more important forces in our lives. . . . But the 'meaning' of the wind, the sun, the rain—of nature—has already changed." *Coming of Age at the End of Nature* attempts to reveal how this change in fundamental relationships has influenced the first generation to grapple throughout their lives with these altered realities.

Today's young-adult generation—a vast group born between about 1980 and 2000—has been closely scrutinized to understand its demographics, influences, attitudes, and behaviors. Several studies, such as the Pew Research Center's 2010 "Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next," describe the age cohort as more ethnically diverse, more educated, and less economically secure than their elders. Comparative research, however, has not determined that millennials are consistently "greener" than Baby Boomers or members of Generation X. "The Climate Change Generation?"

Survey Analysis of the Perceptions and Beliefs of Young Americans," a major 2010 study by American University, Yale University, and George Mason University, focused specifically on climate change views of young adults, noting that "American adults under the age of 35 have come of age in the decades since the 'discovery' of man-made climate change as a major social problem." That national survey revealed that young adults have complex attitudes toward global warming, with some striking contrasts with older generations. As examples, young adults are more likely than their elders to recognize the scientific consensus about climate change and to believe that damage will occur in the relatively near future (ten to fifty years). But only 38 percent of eighteen- to thirty-four-year-olds said they thought about climate change "some" or "a lot," compared with 51 percent of adults aged thirty-five to fifty-nine.

The diversity of millennials further complicates sociological analysis of their viewpoints. The joint university study, looking at age groups within the greater cohort, found the college-aged subgroup viewed climate change consequences as imminent more often than older subgroups, and perceived more climate change-related activity among their friends; 10 percent of eighteen- to twenty-two-year-olds strongly agreed that their friends were acting to reduce warming, compared with just 3 percent of twenty-three- to thirty-four-year-olds. Millennials of all ages who identified as conservatives were more skeptical and less engaged on climate issues than liberals in the study, but large majorities of generation members of all political ideologies trusted

scientists as sources of climate information (100 percent of liberals, 84 percent of moderates, 68 percent of conservatives). "Overall," the researchers conclude, the study provides "no predictable portrait of young people when it comes to global warming." The complex and often surprising survey results make listening to millennials' individual viewpoints still more imperative.

Thus far, a few millennial activist voices have emerged to speak for their age peers. Harvard Divinity School student Tim DeChristopher, for example, conveys his value-driven opposition to fossil fuels from microphones on courthouse steps, at invited conference speeches, on *Late Night with David Letterman*, and in the film *Bigger 70*. We sought, in calling for essays for this book, to engage a broader range of youthful perspectives, including activists but also teachers, editors, journalists, ecologists, community organizers, urban farmers, novelists, cooks, and poets. The wealth of submissions was winnowed carefully to craft a selection by writers from a range of geographic and economic backgrounds and ethnic and cultural heritage. The full spectrum of millennial generation ages is represented: some are college students, others are exploring graduate school or first jobs, and others are established in professions and even parents (or prospective parents) themselves. A few of the pieces have appeared elsewhere, and several of the writers have published other work in *Orion*, *Sage Magazine*, and other journals. But one of this anthology's strengths, we believe, is the predominance of emerging voices, whose first appearance in print will be a consideration of their place in a world at a turning point.

Perhaps not surprisingly, few of the pieces focus on traditional, observational nature writing. Rather, across a range of styles and topics, the contributors explore human relationships to often damaged landscapes and waterways, wildlands and urban spaces, and to the permeable borders between them. Even when a writer delves into the intimate details of a beloved place, a tone of threat and loss inevitably resonates. Redemptive notes of hope in the face of challenges may, or may not, harmonize along. These creative writers, while enmeshed in the context of climate change, explore a rich variety of often overlapping themes. Materialism, shrinking biodiversity, rebounding wildness in urbanized landscapes, technological optimism, and the hubris of past generations are just a few.

As we read and reread our final selections, their basic themes cohered around three thought-provoking ideas.

Disheartened by evidence of irreversible anthropogenic environmental damage, Bill McKibben argues in *Eaarth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (2010) that alterations to the planet are so significant that it deserves a modified name: Eaarth. Seismic shifts in understanding our place in the cosmos dominate the reflections and observations in the first group of essays. Anger rises in several selections, as writers rail against the human-sullied ecosystems they were born to depend upon. In the first part of the anthology, "Living on Eaarth," Ben Goldfarb mourns lost opportunities, asking how to choose a home place when each possibility now seems fragile and transient. But as reflected in Amaris Kercham's "Urban Foraging," these writers are also

determined to survive—even thrive—on Planet Earth. Despite hardships past and future, Ketcham vows to find ways to adapt because “we’re still the same basic creatures we’ve been for millions of years.”

The second part of the book, “Thinking like a River,” speaks to pioneering ecologist Aldo Leopold’s metaphor for “thinking like a mountain” to encourage long-term, holistic ecosystem conservation. The metaphor accepts environmental alterations that evolve through geological time, but the writers in this part seem to think in terms of more dynamic systems. Some embrace an accelerating pace of human-driven change as inevitable, even natural. When uncertainty troubles her young life, student Amy Coplen seeks context and comfort in shifts experienced by past generations. Definitions of wilderness as separate from human influence frustrate Lauren McCrady, who rejoices in the more complex, human-modified, semi-wild landscapes she has grown to love. Writers may question the rapid rate and sometimes dark trajectory of alteration, but they still find joy in the discoveries they make along the way. “The task ahead is to dismantle the boundaries we have constructed,” writes Jason Brown, and then, with openness refreshed, “to watch what happens.”

No one in *Coming of Age at the End of Nature* advocates sabotaging developers’ earth-moving equipment as in Edward Abbey’s novel *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, but the writers in part 3, “Mindful Monkeywrenching,” offer creative solutions to diverse problems, both personal and societal. In “The Wager for Rain,” Megan Kimble cannot find the science-

based cure to drought she seeks but still rails against hopeless inertia, writing that “doing nothing is as much of an action as doing something.” Several writers offer quotidian approaches to saving the world, from mopping floors to sporting Jordan high-tops in the wilderness. And Bonnie Frye Hemphill, while urging political action, asks perhaps the paramount question for all these young activists and change agents, however gentle or strident: “Will you join?”

Young adults care deeply about many issues, and the essays gathered here offer only a sampling. But the writings embody the truth of Henry David Thoreau’s journal entry, written in 1852 when he was thirty-four: “All things in this world must be seen with the morning dew on them. Must be seen with youthful early-opened hopeful eyes.” Careful readers of all ages will find in these pages early-opened philosophical and practical advice, sweet hope, bitter recriminations, dreams hazy and clear, but perhaps most of all, a rising will to do better.