



# The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinctions

*David Quammen*

[Download now](#)

[Read Online](#) ➔

# The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinctions

*David Quammen*

## **The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinctions** David Quammen

In a wonderful weave of science, metaphor, and prose, David Quammen, author of *The Flight of the Iguana*, applies the lessons of island biogeography - the study of the distribution of species on islands and islandlike patches of landscape - to modern ecosystem decay, offering us insight into the origin and extinction of species, our relationship to nature, and the future of our world.

## **The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinctions Details**

Date : Published March 15th 2011 by Scribner (first published August 15th 1996)

ISBN :

Author : David Quammen

Format : Kindle Edition 706 pages

Genre : Science, Nonfiction, Environment, Nature, Biology, Natural History, History

 [Download The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age of ...pdf](#)

 [Read Online The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age o ...pdf](#)

**Download and Read Free Online The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinctions**  
**David Quammen**

---

# From Reader Review The Song of the Dodo: Island Biogeography in an Age of Extinctions for online ebook

## Fab Mackojc says

I didn't enjoy this book very much. Don't get me wrong, I don't think it's poorly written, I just personally don't have enough of an interest in island biogeography to enjoy reading 700 pages of it. I ended up deciding to slog through this book instead of just putting it down. There are definitely a few interesting insights on species extinction but overall I found this a bit dense and drawn-out unless you have a very specific interest on the topic.

---

## Mads says

Wildlife biologist and author Aldrin Mallari lent me a copy of this staggering book after knowing I had read "Wild Thoughts From Wild Places." I think I learned more about biogeography from reading this book than talking to a dozen biologists. The final image of the last Dodo on earth hunkering down in the jungle is haunting. Whenever I hear a Dutch ecologist try to lecture me about how Filipinos are ruining their environment, Quammen's descriptions of how the Dutch sailors clubbed and hunted to extinction the Dodo always pop to mind. But I keep silent.

---

## Jeanette says

No rating. I read about a fourth and then skim read about half more. His tone and attitude is so much accusatory and "chicken little" that what particles of real information that I can get about island isolation and other historic evolutionary boundaries, is lost within his sarcasm and blaming. Not for me his attitude, nor his disrespect. He writes of humans as if they were bacteria. He actually fat shames too, tourists or any one who he sees as action or appearance worthy for ridicule. (Those "beefy Australians" etc.) I did get one nugget out of this. And that is that line of demarcation between species types that runs between those two islands placed in that line near east end of the general Java area. And how one is on land (continental) bridge and one is not. So despite there being only 20 miles between them (these two islands), the history and evolution of their animal and especially mammal types are entirely different. Obviously one of the islands, the west one- it has traveled there and was once part of the continent itself. While the other never was.

It also needs an immense edit as so many of the page after page tangent asides and travelogue minutia that has absolutely nothing to do with the title focus has been included. Why? Then title it appropriately as a travelogue? It still doesn't work, IMHO. And it doesn't help that he sees ecosystems as rather "stuck in time" features; he has quite a few dated theories as belief cores on top of it.

It's truly bad when a scientist becomes so negative and sour that they write with this tone as a near constant. As if humans should all just take numbers in some lottery fashion and commit suicide by 75% and then the rest should go back to live in caves- so that no other species has a "disadvantage". Nature LAUGHS at his attitude, in truth. Because before homo and ever since homo there have always been majority species extinctions. At some points almost 80 or 90% of all living things (botany as well as biology) have evolved to other forms or had their own categories become extinct. NOTHING is ever in freeze frame. He knows this.

Too much angry ire to sift through here in order to get to the observational science, IMHO. Others may surely want to sift. I do not.

---

## **Jo Marshall says**

After reading 'The Flight of the Iguana' by David Quammen, I had no qualms about undertaking another amazing journey, 'The Song of the Dodo' even though I had no clue at the time what island biogeography was, and only an elementary concept of extinction. This book could actually have had many titles that would have been equally mysterious to an environmental layman like me: 'The History of Biogeography and What That Actually Is' or 'Great Men With Controversial Theories of Biodiversity, and Other Such Stuff' or 'The Inevitable Spiral Toward Species Extinction - And That Includes All Species' or even 'How We Came to Value Modern Conservation Science or Something Like That.' But I began reading Quammen's story anyway because I knew from his earlier book that he was incredibly informative in a casual, "favorite professor" sort of way. Meaning that just when your comprehension starts to fail, he speaks directly to you from his narrative, and snaps you back onto a level playing field of enlightenment. I read it because I knew Quammen would teach me something important that I would remember, and that his topics always matter. I call this a story, because it reads like one. It begins simply, and ends the same way. In between, all the historical facts, scientific theories, and personality studies come to actually mean something in today's world, and will to anyone who reads this book. And I guarantee that you will cry because you've never heard the song of the dodo, and cry, too, because Quammen helped you hear those of the indri and the cenderawasih.

---

## **John says**

A great book about ecology and travel

This is unquestionably the finest book I've read that explains biogeography and population ecology in clear, concise English for the average intelligent person interested in the natural world who lacks a background in science. Quammen deserves highest praise for devoting much time to learn relevant science and then disseminating this knowledge to his readers. Much to my amazement, Quammen fully understands the implications of MacArthur's and Wilson's theory of island biogeography, encompassing such diverse subjects as determining the appropriate size of wildlife refuges to studying cycles of mass extinction in the marine invertebrate fossil record. He gives compelling descriptions of Alfred R. Wallace, Robert H. MacArthur, and E. O. Wilson as scientists and people, pointing out the importance of Wallace's and MacArthur's work towards our understanding of biogeography and indeed, of biological diversity. To his credit, Quammen mentions other significant players, such as Ernst Mayr, Daniel Simberloff, Jared Diamond, and of course, Charles Darwin himself. Mixed successfully with biography and scientific research are lyrical passages about the many islands Quammen visited in pursuit of Wallace's footsteps and ongoing important ecological research. Anyone wishing to catch more than a glimpse of great science and how it pertains directly to preserving endangered species should read this magnificent book.

(Reposted from my 2001 Amazon review.)

---

## Stephen says

I have owned a copy of “The Song of the Dodo” for several years but at 625 pages, 178 chapters it seemed a bit daunting to dive into. There never seemed to be enough hours in the day. But after reading Quammen’s “The Reluctant Mr. Darwin,” I felt it was time to give it a go. And go I did.

I think a good editor could have probably cut this tome down to 623 pages, which is my backhanded way of saying that "TSOTD" is a monumental book on natural history, well worth the time you need to invest into all 178 chapters. You'll never look at the natural world in the same way again.

Quammen does a skillful job of balancing scientific chapters with his worldly travels and adventures, taking us to exotic places around the globe with historical or environmental significance. But the real power in the book is his exploration into the development of ecology, basically beginning when the science found its chops, i.e. the data it had been collecting was actually put to use.

After finishing “The Song of the Dodo,” I feel that I have earned the equivalent of a PhD in island biogeography. (I wonder if I can use this on my résumé?) If I had read this book 25 years ago, I would have found my way to an ecology department at some university.

Early in the book the author describes the stack of photocopies of scientific papers “weighing eighteen pounds including the staples,” he has on his desk. By his own admission, he could have used the assemblage in the back of his truck to provide extra weight on icy roads in winter but instead, Quammen chose to read them and synthesize the information for us; presenting them in layman’s terms, explaining the jargon: minimum viable population, area-species relationships, equilibrium theory, inbreeding depression, et cetera. Lucky for us he did.

By the end of the book we have a real sense of just how endangered endangered species really are. The dodo was only one of the first to go.

Powerful book. David Quammen can write compelling science with a sense of humor.

This is a six star book, but I only have five to award.

---

## Ms.pegasus says

This is a book about history: Animals and plants that once were and are no more, and how we should interpret that fact. When the question, “Why?” was asked, a new science was born. Quammen spends considerable effort building a context for this science. At first there were only observations, lists of features, catalogues of previously unknown species. Haphazard collections of these curiosities of nature captured the interest of Victorian naturalists. Volumes were filled. The list of new species seemed interminable. All of this was happening against a backdrop of belief in religious doctrine: Special creation, an earth whose age was reckoned in terms of thousands rather than millions of years, and of course, Noah's ark. One scholar tried to accommodate the crowd with a new ark design: *“...a boxy, three-story structure resembling a Super 8 motel, beneath which appears no trace of a hull. Unquestionably it would have allowed efficient division of space into many stalls and cages, but it doesn't look seaworthy.... By the end of the seventeenth century, naturalists were aware of 500 bird species, 150 quadruped species, and about 10,000 species of*

*invertebrates. Fifty years later, when Linnaeus began putting things in order, those numbers were still growing quickly. Linnaeus himself named and catalogued almost 6,000 species. The ark was overbooked.*" (Chapter 5)

Despite their unsystematic methodologies, some began to discover patterns. As early as 1772 Johann Reinhold Forster noticed that big islands seemed to harbor more diverse species than small islands. Why? Alfred Russel Wallace wrote in the 1850's that old islands had more unique (endemic) species than newer ones. Why? Mammals on isolated islands tended toward dwarfism while reptiles tended toward gigantism (e.g. Pleistocene miniature elephants on Sicily and the modern Komodo dragon, respectively). Again, why? Looking for those answers fed the new science.

Conjecture about reasons for speciation and extinction have shifted in context and conceptual framework over time. Quammen defines, contextualizes, and illustrates a list of specific processes (his "insular menu") that are critical to understanding the process of speciation and of extinction. For adaptive radiation he offers the story of the tenrec, an insectivore which branched into over 30 species all dwelling exclusively on Madagascar. To highlight the significance of reproductive isolation, he recounts Wallace's examination of two neighboring islands, Bali and Lombok. The wildlife of Bali was similar to the wildlife of Borneo; on nearby Lombok, a dissimilar array of families were variants of New Guinea's. The split (later named the Wallace line) ran the length of the Malay Archipelago, and the key piece of information would later be found in the geologic origins of the archipelago. To illustrate dispersal, Quammen describes the repopulation of Rakata, the barren aftermath of Krakatoa. The 30 pound ground dwelling dodo that once inhabited Madagascar is a classic case of loss of defensive adaptation. Examined separately, each of these processes appears obvious. They become complicated because in the real world they do not operate separately. In case after case, Quammen demonstrates how an obvious hypothesis morphs into a complicated historical process once the facts are examined. If there is a single lesson to be learned, it is that speciation and extinction are not simple processes.

A conceptual focus of his book is the species-area relationship. It is a reworking of the relationship between island size and species diversity noticed by Foster. It's the reason Quammen begins with island biogeography. The area of an island is easily computed. The 18th century intuitive conjecture received mathematical support in the 20th century when Philip Darlington censused amphibian and reptile species in the Antilles. His data-based generalization was that the division of area by ten divides amphibian and reptile fauna by two (Chapter 108). Frank Preston, an engineer and conservationist, summarized his observations about relative abundance of a species into another mathematical formula (the canonical distribution of commonness and rarity). Fortunately, Quammen focuses on the implication of Preston's conclusion, rather than the mathematical model: " '...it is not possible to preserve in a State or National Park a complete replica on a small scale of the fauna and flora of a much larger area.' " (Chapter 109) Why? The answer relies on making the distinction between a sample and an isolate. Preserves may begin as samples. They end up as isolates. Isolates reduce immigration to the value of zero, a major disruption to the immigration-extinction balance. It's a chilling conclusion if the hypothesis is correct.

A descriptive science was struggling to become a predictive science. The defining moment was the equilibrium model developed by Robert MacArthur and E.O. Wilson in the 1960's. They quantified the factors controlling extinction and immigration on an island in order to predict species impoverishment. The prediction implied a set point of equilibrium. The second leap they made was the analogy between actual islands and ecological islands – habitats separated by physical barriers: "...literal islands, surrounded by water, are only one sort of insular situation. Also to be considered are virtual islands, surrounded by other kinds of barrier." (Chapter 122). A corollary of this model is that there is a balance between immigration and extinction (back to the isolate vs. sample distinction), and that this balance can be expressed

mathematically. James Brown studied small mammals in the American Great Basin region. Again, Quammen summarizes: *"Insularization, for the Great Basin mountaintop communities, entailed an inexorable decline in diversity. Does this sound ominous? Does it sound familiar? The same phenomenon would eventually be known by various labels, one of which is ecosystem decay."* (Chapter 122).

Once the connection between habitat fragmentation and insularity was made, the field of applied biogeography was launched. It's a controversial field. Eloquenty supported by Wilson and Jared Diamond, the resulting models are still only hypotheses. Despite Quammen's obvious leanings, he carefully lays out the position of opponents. It's a controversy that is fraught with consequence. Misapplication of the model will be an executioner's axe for species deemed "unviable" prematurely. The crux of the matter is: Can something as complex as biodiversity ever be reduced to a workable model?

Quammen has written a truly scientific book for the unscientific layperson. He intersperses essays with the flavor of travelogue and colorful biographical sketches of key field researchers with the tough scientific hypotheses they are investigating, and succeeds in holding the reader's interest through all of some seven hundred plus pages. He addresses the emotional roots of conservation with hard science. Yes, all species are not equal. Some, like the panda, are charismatic to the general public. But there is a larger context that will affect their survival. That context includes examination of rare, highly specialized, and vulnerable species. To understand the survival of this broader category, we need to understand the real world of species dynamics. Thus, Quammen is able to link emotional with ethical and scientific concerns. That link is eloquently expressed when Quammen visits Dan Simberloff, the leading critic of the equilibrium model as proposed by Jared Diamond. Simberloff stopped visiting the Florida Keys sites of the Mangrove experiments he once conducted with E.O. Wilson. *"I was driving down to one of the field sites....I came off Seven Mile bridge, passed over the first key....from Missouri Key I would see the trees of Ohio Key. Instead of Ohio Key I didn't see anything. Then, when I got to the end of Missouri Key, I could see that the reason was, there were no trees there. The entire key, which would have been in the range of four acres, had been leveled and cleared. It was now all crushed coral. It had been turned into a trailer park....I was so..."* He pauses. He starts again. *'I drove right over it into the next key, which is Bahia Honda, where the state park is. And I pulled over, and cried. I couldn't handle it. It was just so sad. And it so epitomized what was happening in the Keys....That's why I stopped working there,'* he says." (Chapter 138)

This is not an easy book. The material is an assemblage of 178 untitled chapters grouped into ten broad headings. The first hundred pages is devoted almost entirely to Wallace's contribution vs. Darwin's to the theory of natural selection. The chapters jump back and forth in time as Quammen seeks to tie together each concept with both historical antecedents and modern day field research. The most vivid chapters are anecdotal such as a dicey foray into the interior of Komodo Island after watching a feeding staged for the tourists. Quammen finds a guide to take him to Loh Sabita Valley *"...where the deer are not tame, the water is not bottled, goat carcasses don't fall from the sky, and the komodos still live by their skill as hunters."* (Chapter 45). Another memorable story is the mysterious saga of bird extinction on Guam. Quammen accompanies a herpetologist on his nightly rounds. Quammen is such a vivid writer that the casual reader could be satisfied merely to be entertained by these tales. However, the attempt to understand the harder scientific implications is well worth the extra effort and a lot of effort is required due to the embedded structure of this book. I found it necessary to approach the material as if reading a textbook, taking notes at the end of each chapter in order to follow the scientific thread. (A google search reveals that several study guides to the book are available). The book is assigned reading in several college courses. Quammen's intent, however, is obviously to draw the general reader into the realm of real science. As with all such books, the reader's gain will be proportional to his effort, and in the end, well rewarded.

NOTES:

<http://amongthestatelytrees.wordpress...> Interesting comments from college students who read the book as part of their class.

<http://www.colorado.edu/journalism/ce...>

An annotated bibliography of books about environment and conservation science.

I recommend reading the paper edition of this book. Many of the islands mentioned are quite small and obscure. There are a number of helpful maps in the book which are difficult to view on an e-reader. Some supplemental maps online can be found for Aru ([www.peterloud.co.uk/indonesia/aru2.gif](http://www.peterloud.co.uk/indonesia/aru2.gif)); and the islands of Flores and Timor ([http://www.pindito.com/et40d/diving\\_a...](http://www.pindito.com/et40d/diving_a...))

---

### **Ellen says**

I finished it! (Further thoughts coming soon)

---

### **Dac Crossley says**

This came highly recommended. And Island biogeography has been important in the development of ecological theory.

The first part of the book discusses Alfred Wallace; it's very well written and I enjoyed it. I began to part with the author when he spoke disparagingly about a simple first-order equation. He claimed he didn't need to understand it. I realized that he didn't. Things went downhill after that.

Two flaws. Quammen doesn't seem to grasp the significance of ecosystems. The fauna (and flora) he discusses are interacting members. They don't strive in a vacuum. Secondly, the doctrine of landscape ecology would take him a lot further than he was able to go. It just doesn't come up. He's stuck with some dated ideas.

---

### **Laura says**

"This one goes to 11." I would give this book 11 stars if I could.

This is THE book I recommend to people as an introduction to evolution, evolutionary biology, extinction, or anything related. I made my mother read this book. And she enjoyed it. David Quammen (whom I have been



lucky enough to have drinks with...yes, I'm totally name-dropping here) is an absolutely amazing story teller who seamlessly weaves an engaging narrative of travel adventure, scientific research, and conservationism. Not only does Quammen enlighten the reader about current biogeography, state of the environment, and evolutionary biology research, but he's personally interviewed and, in many cases, traveled with these scientist, so adds a sense of travel narrative to his voice. I'm used to reading scientific text, and never once did this book read like a text book (despite it being assigned for a class). There are many lessons that can be taken from this book - from an understanding of scientific and evolutionary principles to embracing our environmental stewardship to a reminder of our shared human nature across continents and races. I challenge everyone to give this book a try.

Here's my quick review I gave to pimp Song of the Dodo to a Church study group, to whom I gave a lecture on Darwinism:

"My favorite evolution book that I recommend the most is "Song of the Dodo". It's not short (700 pages), but it's a very easy, entertaining read - David Quammen (the author) is a fantastic storyteller. It's also very accessible to the non-scientist. Quammen explains about "island biogeography in a time of extinction" using personal stories about island research (islands are hot beds for evolution) to explain mechanisms of evolution and extinction. Though it's long, people could just read the first chapter for an intro and then go from there time-depending. It's told as a first person narrative through a series of stories/travel adventures/interviews. Though it makes a complete lesson by the end, it can be taken in pieces very well. This is by far one of my favorite books."

---

### **Jen says**

One of my all-time favorite books (this was a re-read) by my favorite natural history author. Anyone who likes Stephen Jay Gould or Howard Zinn style writing will enjoy David Quammen. Not only is it beautifully written, it intertwines stories of the development of the theory of evolution with modern scientific research and travel, and serves as a call to arms to save the last great wild places.

---

### **Reid says**

This is the first book I've read by Quammen, an imminently talented journalist who perfectly balances the information and writing style of the book. He follows a chronological progression of island biogeography from Darwin through Jared Diamond (who became hugely famous shortly after the release of this book). Quammen's travelogues are excellent, combining a sympathetic, open perspective that is adventurous and engaged. Late in the book, Quammen describes a climb to the nest of a Mauritius kestrel: "When I'm thirty feet up, a tree branch flicks off my glasses, which drop to the ground. I could go down and retrieve them, sure, that would be sensible, but I'd fall too far behind the cheerful maniacs..." "Do you trust this vine?" I call up to Jones. Gangly but tall, he must weigh two hundred pounds, and from this angle I can appreciate the size of his feet.

'Not greatly.'

We ratchet our way upward, slowly, on the cliff face. It isn't Half Dome but it's more perilous than the average birdwatching stroll. We rise out above the valley. As we move beyond the treetops, I give myself an explicit mental reminder: Fall from here and you don't go home. Finally, Jones and I catch up with Lewis on a narrow rock shelf, like a window ledge ten stories above Lexington Avenue...

I gaze out at the panorama--the forested canyon below us, the deer ranch beyond, and the cane plantation beyond that, all spreading westward for five miles to the crescent of beach and then the great turquoise plane of the Indian Ocean." (562-3)

It's Quammen's excitement and sensitivity that inspire the reader to continue and to care, to take notice of humanity's influence: carving nature into islands, resulting in astonishing rates of extinction and ecosystem decay. But Quammen urges us to cling to hope, not despair, because "besides being fruitless it's far less exciting than hope, however slim." (636)

---

## **brian dean says**

A fantastic book whose only flaw is that it requires the reader to keep track of various storylines.

Let's get my only complaint out of the way. Quammen does a good job of making us feel like we are part of the investigation into island biogeography but he does so by mixing several storylines together. These are the participants, locations and the time they occur, as they occur in the first unit.

Wallace's 1856 trip from Singapore to Lambok

Quammen's recent trip to Lambok

Nicolo di Conti's trip to to the Malay Archipelago

The ark and creation

Wallace's trip (again)

Quammen in Madagascar

Lyle and Darwin in England

Quammen in Madagascar (again)

Charles Lyell's trip 1856, to the Madieras (Atlantic Ocean)

Darwin's Beagle travels 1831

Wallace in Brazil, 1848

Quammen's travels in Brazil, modern

Wallace in Malaysia, 1854

Wallace in Dobo, 1857 Aru Islands -all this in Unit 1!

The book ends with Quammen in the Aru islands around 140 years after Wallace.

Maybe breaking the stories into bite sized pieces makes them more digestible but Quammen's own trip in Malaysia takes about 50 pages and is spread out over 630 pages.

I guess that's the difference between a very interesting book on modern science and a not-so-interesting science textbook. And this book is interesting. Every little piece fits together nicely and explains the subject well.

I like the way the author followed in the tracks of the people he writes about. I certainly felt a bit of a thrill in

Australia, inland of Sydney, reading Darwin's account of the Beagle voyage and seeing the same sights he did. He described how he saw convicts working the stone to make steps and around Katoomba, I saw those very steps. I had the same feeling while traveling across Canada and reading a history of Canada. I read it as I crossed the Rockies and really got a feel for how important the railway was - in a way that I didn't in history class.

The subject is the ecology of islands but it is much more than that. Almost any place on earth can be described as an island for various animal groups. National parks in Korea (and elsewhere) are islands of wilderness in an urban or agricultural sea. Caves are islands; how do cave species cross lighted ground to another cave? Mountain tops are islands separated by valleys and valleys can be islands separated by mountains. Lakes are islands and deep areas in those lakes can also be islands, separated from other deep areas by shallow areas. One species of snake described in the book lived only in riffles or fast moving water in a few rivers. Those sets of rapids were separated by slow moving water that was home to larger snakes that preyed on them. Suburban residential blocks are grassy islands that are surrounded by treacherous asphalt

Some animals can travel from island to island. Most birds, but surprisingly, not all, fit this group. Small predators like foxes or raccoons can also cross from one wilderness to another. Large predators or herbivores cannot. Tigers, bears and deer all have trouble crossing from safe harbor to safe harbor. .

A key part of island biogeography is determining how many species can live on an island. Typically the number of species on an island remains the same even while some species die out and new ones enter. This part of the book reminded me of my biology classes at university where I studied evolution but apparently forgot a lot until this book, much more grippingly, refreshed my memory. If you want to learn about evolution, this is the book.

The other side of new species evolving is older species going extinct. In most of history, the number of new species appearing equaled the number disappearing. Now, the extinction rate has increased 100 times and the end of the book has the required warnings and doom and gloom; "To despair of the entire situation is another reasonable alternative."

The content of this book affects Korea. There is a lot about the appropriate size of wildlife parks. Signs at Seorak Park claim there are bears in the park and Chilisan National Park has had researchers trying to find bears there. They may exist but are there enough to maintain a longterm population? As a qualified estimate from the book, a population of 50 is required to maintain a healthy population. I suppose the book could be used as justification for turning the whole DMZ into a park come reunification. Breaking it into farmland or even crossing it with highways will significantly reduce it's usefulness to large-bodied wildlife.

If you are interested in travelling to almost any island, this book will tell you about that island. Again, if you want to understand evolution, this is the book. If you are interested in the pragmatic details of wilderness conservation, this is the book.

---

## **Sylvia says**

Disclaimer: I'm only about a third of the way through, I'll update this review as I go. So far:

This book is physically **WEIGHTY**. At first, I was pleased about this--if it's a good read give me more of it!-

-but as I went I grew more and more disappointed.

No, the length isn't really important, except that I feel a fine editor could have cut this into a 4-star book with ease. Quammen tells a compelling narrative of interesting, oft-overlooked biologists such as Alfred Wallace, whose story alone was worth the read.

The personal narratives and conversations are hit and miss. I didn't love the author waxing poetic about viewing a pile of giant tortoises with his native guide, but I absolutely adored his conversations with a scientist studying tenrecs. That editor could give Quammen the benefit of the doubt: leave all these colorful digressions in. However, I would humbly suggest that this story need not be punctuated with:

- a solid page of Latin names of island creatures, which the author himself bids me to forget immediately
- the titles of twenty papers on island biogeography that are on the author's desk
- a half-page about a slightly mistranslated English sign in Indonesia

I can't even imagine how those survived the editing process. But they are just symptomatic of the larger problem: decadence. Wherever Quammen could proffer 2 or 3 or 5 examples...he puts 20. A short explanation of the different locations of giant tortoise species becomes a chapter, a showy rug analogy drags on for paragraphs. Editor!

The author is great, GREAT, when in the middle of a chapter on some historical biologist, cutting through the bushy undergrowth to a brilliant scientific discovery. He does a good job summarizing scientific topics in an understandable way. He is pretty decent at throwing in relevant digressions from his personal experience to enrich the story. In fact overall I think the author did everything that an author should be expected to do.

The editor, though, needs to sack up and get out the machete.

---

## **Tippy Jackson says**

This book is one of my favorites and another one that feels more like a journey that I didn't want to end. It asks questions about the distribution of various animal species and uses island biogeography to understand extinction patterns. Follows the history of Wallace and Darwin and other early scientists and the use of islands to find the origin of species from other species. Visits the island of Komodo and tells the age old tale of the last of the Dodos, which was documented in a journal as having been eaten. Some other interesting facts were:

- older, larger continental island have more biodiversity than younger, smaller or volcanic islands (pretty clear)
- isolation, speciation and dispersal are all parts of island biogeography
- Wallace lost his entire collection from 4 years in the Amazon in a boat fire on his way home, and funded his trip by sending samples back to England to be sold, which gave him an eye for intraspecific variation.
- ecosystem decay-an ecosystem cut into a smaller piece will become increasingly diminished and will lose its biological richness WITHOUT growing smaller. Discusses the SLOSS argument and, most amusing for myself, he pokes fun at the immaturity of the two scientists going back and forth on this argument, one of whom happens to be my ex-Biometry teacher and he described him perfectly and really hit the nail on the head. LOL!
- Giant tortoises on islands in the Indian Ocean, 150,000 left on Aldabra, heavily hunted on other islands
- speciation-a split-one species is now two, phyletic evolution-one species changes over time until it is a new

species.

BTW, for some shameless self-promotion, if you like reading about animals, check out my blog on wildlife at <http://backyardzoologist.wordpress.com/> ...although I don't pretend to be nearly as good a writer as David Quammen

---