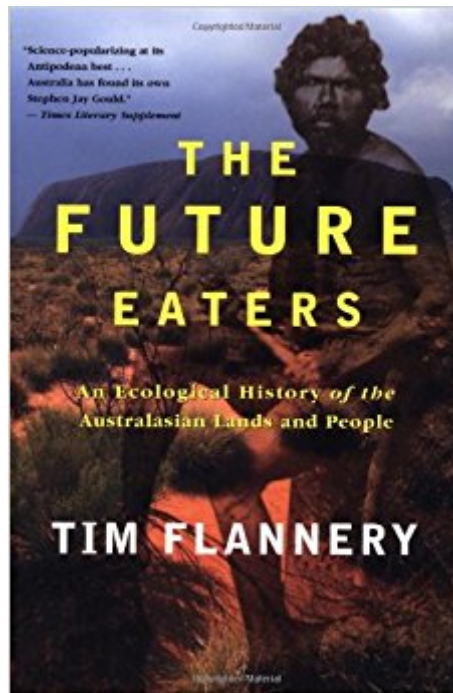




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# The Future Eaters: An Ecological History Of The Australasian Lands And People



## Synopsis

Humans first settled the islands of Australia, New Zealand, New Caledonia, and New Guinea some sixty millennia ago, and as they had elsewhere across the globe, immediately began altering the environment by hunting and trapping animals and gathering fruits and vegetables. In this illustrated iconoclastic ecological history, acclaimed scientist and historian Tim Flannery follows the environment of the islands through the age of dinosaurs to the age of mammals and the arrival of humanity on its shores, to the coming of European colonizers and the advent of the industrial society that would change nature's balance forever. Penetrating, gripping, and provocative, *The Future Eaters* is a dramatic narrative history that combines natural history, anthropology, and ecology on an epic scale. "Flannery tells his beautiful story in plain language, science-popularizing at its Antipodean best." -- *Times Literary Supplement* "Like the present-day incarnation of some early-nineteenth-century explorer-scholar, Tim Flannery refuses to be fenced in." -- *Time*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Who destroys or "eats" the future? Those who have not shared a past: coevolution is the key to survival of all species, maintains Flannery, a senior research scientist in mammalogy at the Australian Museum in Sydney. Just as human immunities have failed when confronted with previously isolated viruses, so entire ecosystems have crumbled with the introduction of man. Australia, New Zealand, New Caledonia and New Guinea make for an interesting case study: though once conjoined, they later separated, developing disparate climates and soil types. Equally important, they were colonized at different times, with man reaching Australia 45,000 to 60,000

years ago and New Caledonia just 3500 years ago. Flannery posits that these virgin islands, which were replete with unexploited resources, naive, almost "tame," herbivores and no real competition from other predators, allowed man to make "the great leap forward" to become not just one species among many but the species. New virgin territories presented other opportunities for wealth, population growth, leisure and subsequent leaps forward. But the cost is invariably great: human populations soar, then drop as food sources become extinct or soil is exhausted and imported ideas of agriculture, husbandry and hunting slowly give way to environmental reality--reality that is particularly harsh to Australia's poor soil. With great skill and research, Flannery demonstrates the subtle interaction that makes an ecosystem work, from glaciers to fire, from dung beetles to man. In the process he makes a formidable, sometimes frightening argument for careful cooperation with--rather than domination of--the world. Copyright 1995 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

During the ice ages, when the sea level was low, Australia, New Guinea, Tasmania, and smaller islands reemerged as a single landmass known as Meganesia, connected to Antarctica. Harsh conditions selected those species most adapted to the cold: amphibians, marsupials, monotremes?species with lower metabolic rates and low energy needs. When Meganesia separated from Antarctica 36 million years ago, species extinctions began. Isolated from the rest of the world, Australia developed unique flora and fauna to become a land rich in minerals and fossils but having the poorest soil of any continent because of geological inactivity. The first Australians consumed without replacing resources they would need in the future; later-arriving Europeans destroyed even more. In this fascinating, thought-provoking ecological history of his homeland, Flannery, a senior research scientist at the Australian Museum in Sydney, reveals how humans?and other species?transplanted out of their original habitat become "future eaters" by the indiscriminate consumption of a land's resources. Flannery voices his theories and opinions while also presenting opposing viewpoints, creating a well-balanced, extremely readable treatise. Highly recommended for all collections.?Gloria Maxwell, Kansas City P.L., KansasCopyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to an alternate Paperback edition.

After spending more than 20 years reading hundreds of books describing various aspects of the Earth Crisis, *The Future Eaters* by Tim Flannery stands out. It provides a sliver of hope for the future that is not built on magical thinking. Flannery is a lad who is madly in love with the Australian region, and he dreams that it will eventually heal, far down the road someday. Here's the story.

Hominids evolved in Africa, and later migrated into Eurasia, where they lived in some regions for a million years before *Homo sapiens* drifted in. In ecosystems where the fauna coevolved with hominids, the critters clearly understood that two-legs were predators, and they behaved accordingly. But when *Homo sapiens* first appeared in Australia, none of the critters had ever seen a two-leg before, so they had no fear. The fearless elephant seals on King Island weighed up to four tons. They would calmly sun themselves while humans killed the animal sitting beside them. On Kangaroo Island, men could walk up to fearless kangaroos and dispatch them with clubs. Millions of birds were killed with sticks. Flannery referred to these hunters as future eaters. Future eaters were *Homo sapiens* that migrated into lands where the ecosystem had not coevolved with hominids. Australians were the first future eaters, but far from the last. The first phase of future eating was to hunt like there's no tomorrow. For example, New Zealand was loaded with birds. Moas were ostrich-like birds that could grow to 10 feet (3 m) tall, and weigh 550 pounds (250 kg). Future eaters arrived between 800 and 1,000 years ago, and by 400 years ago the moas were extinct. Today we have found many collections of moa bones, some containing the remains of up to 90,000 birds. Evidence suggests that a third of the meat was tossed away to rot. Obviously, the birds were super-abundant and super-easy to kill. Meanwhile, well-fed future eaters gave birth to growing numbers of baby future eaters. More killers + less prey = trouble. The party got ugly. Friendly neighbors became mortal enemies. Moas disappeared from the menu, and were replaced by Moe and Mona from a nearby village. Cannibalism beats starvation. Overhunting and overbreeding, followed by bloody social breakdown, was a normal pattern in the world of the future eaters. Following the crash, the survivors had two options: learn from their mistakes, or fool around with new mistakes. The New Zealanders didn't have time to get their act together before they were discovered by palefaces. It was a different story in New Caledonia, where the future eaters arrived 3,500 years ago. They partied hard, crashed, did the warfare thing, adapted to their damaged ecosystem, and were having a nice time when Captain Cook washed up on shore. Future eating contributed to extinctions. In Australia, large animals were going extinct by 35,000 years ago. Most megafauna in the Americas vanished 11,000 years ago. In New Caledonia, it was 3,500 years ago. In recently settled New Zealand, big animals went extinct 500 to 800 years ago. In Africa, Asia, and Europe, some megafauna managed to survive, because of coevolution. The unlucky ones were domesticated, which led to radical changes in our way of life. Enslaved horses facilitated the bloody spread of the Indo-European culture from Ireland to India. Along with oxen, horses enabled the expansion of soil mining. Vast forests were eliminated to make room for growing herds of hooved locusts. Australia is an unusual continent. It has been geologically static for 60 million years. Most of

the soil is extremely old, and very low in nutrients. Consequently, the fauna that won the evolution sweepstakes were energy efficient, majoring in marsupials and reptiles. On other continents, soils often contain twice as much phosphate and nitrates. Lands having rich soils produced energy-guzzling ecosystems, including large numbers of megafauna. The most energy-intensive species of all are warm-blooded carnivores like us. Europe has 660 million people, and Australia has 17 million. In addition to feeble soils, Australia has spooky weather, driven by the El Niño or Southern Oscillation (ENSO). The climate unpredictably swings between droughts and floods. Droughts can last for many years, and then be washed away with a deluge. These freaky swings encourage cautious lifestyles, weed out energy-guzzling species, and make agriculture especially unreliable. Flannery wonders if it's moral to live as a vegetarian in Australia, destroying seven kilograms of irreplaceable soil, upon which everything depends, for each kilogram of bread we consume? This question is relevant in all lands. There is no free lunch in farm country. Anyway, before humans arrived in the Australian region, the ecosystems were self-sustaining. Then came the future eaters. Extinctions included species that had performed essential ecosystem functions, like controlling woody brush. When brush got out of control, it reduced grazing land for herbivores, and encouraged devastating wildfires. To reduce this new imbalance, Aborigines periodically lit fires to keep the fuel from accumulating. Unfortunately, during burns, soil nutrients went up in smoke, especially nitrogen. Exposed soils were vulnerable to wind erosion. The land got drier. Centuries of burning produced a downward spiral that was largely irreversible. There was no undo command. The hunters must have had turbulent times as the initial era of plenty and prosperity dissolved into scarcity. Then, for 60,000 years Aborigines managed the crippled ecosystems, preventing them from degenerating further. For the last 12,000 years, surviving evidence suggests that they lived in a stable and sustainable manner. They succeeded at this by learning the most important trick of all "adapting to their ecosystem. They were forced to return their future eater badges and uniforms, and they were glad to do so. Meanwhile, back in Eurasia, the nutrient rich soils were sprouting the biggest and craziest mob of future eaters to ever walk the Earth. For the last 12,000 years, they have exploded in number, exterminated the megafauna, laid waste to forests and fisheries, and spilled oceans of blood. Then, they discovered Australia, and imported the future eater mindset, with predictable results. Today, the human population of the planet is almost entirely future eaters. Our binge of plenty and prosperity is wheezing, bleeding, and staggering. Climate change and the end of cheap and abundant energy will derail civilization as we know it. We are proceeding into an era of scarcity and conflict. When the smoke eventually clears, we would be wise to learn the most important trick of all. On the plus side,

we are the first future eaters to comprehend the catastrophic effects of our future eating lifestyle. It's never too late to learn, think, and grow. There's never been a better time to question everything. In a thousand years, if we make it, we may be asked to return our badges and uniforms. There is hope! Hooray!

This book is divided into 3 main parts: 1. An Infinity Before Man: about the geological development of the islands of Meganesia (including mainly Australia, Tasmania, New Zealand North and South, New Caledonia), and their subsequent climatological, botanical, and zoological evolution. 2. The Arrival of the Future Eaters: about the native peoples of the islands of Meganesia (Australians and Maori mainly), their arrival into their traditional lands, and the impact they had shaping those lands and their biota. 3. The Last Wave: Arrival of the Europeans: about the role of Europeans in colonizing Australia and shaping its ecology in an attempt to transform that land into something more familiar and convenient for them, but also about more recent understanding of the limits of the continent to support a growing population and the need to preserve its indigenous biota. This book would be especially enjoyed by those interested in Australian aborigines and the longterm impact of man's livelihood on his environment.

I will go to the ridge of Okawa  
I will pluck out his liver  
That will show these men  
What I mean when I speak of revenge.  
Where is the man that could kill you?  
Where is the hand that defiled you?  
No! the gods willed you to die,  
Tore out your heart and lungs,  
Splintered bones and spattered brains like vomit,  
ribs picked clean  
And blood oozing through the stones  
Of the feast.  
Let your foul cousins taste  
The sweetness of their ancestress  
In thy breast. Mairi-i-rangi  
Will lie like a stone in their belly.  
-Makere of the Ati-Awa

Tim Flannery's biogeochemical history of Australasia is so masterful that he is able to provide an ecological explanation for Makere's powerful tangi that dates to the beginning of the eighteenth century. New Zealand and Easter Island are two of the more extreme examples on record of Pacific islands peopled to their carrying capacity that suffered from deforestation, ate their way through the moa, and finally turned to endemic cannibalistic warfare in order to sate their desire for protein. Mr. Flannery traces the path of Gondwana from where it sat astride the South Pole at a warmer time in our past, with large-eyed dwarf T-rex stalking through the weeks of darkness. As Gondwana broke up, Meganesia and Tasmantis formed, the land masses that respectively incorporated Australia, Tasmania, and New Guinea, while New Zealand, Stewart Island, and New Caledonia constituted Tasmantis. 'The Future Eaters' is one of Flannery's earlier works and presages his brilliant 'The Eternal Frontier,' an ecological history of North America and its

peoples. But Flannery is Australian and hence brings a far more personal perspective to 'Future Eaters.' He tells of the planet's poorest soil producing an efficiency-driven ecology of marsupials, and later firestick farming by humans. His chapters on the early colonization of Australia, the Dreamtime, build a good case for 70 000 years ago, and his theories on the Indonesian Archipelago and the origin of black skin somewhere around the Wallace Line and a subsequent back-colonization of Africa through Madagascar are as delightful as they are speculative, controversial, and well reasoned. The more we study human evolution, the more baroque, indeed cyberpunk, it gets. Mr. Flannery's analysis includes the El Nino weather pattern that has framed the region's climate for millions of years, and becomes something of a psycho-history when he discusses how Australians have viewed themselves and their place in the world over the decades. Dr. Flannery is a world-renowned marsupial expert and has discovered and named several new species in Australia and New Guinea. 'Future Eaters' dates from 1994 and does not have the flawless writing style of Flannery's recent books, the problem may be more in the editing, as the words "concern" and "concerning" appear maddeningly about five times per page. Other than this minor quibble, Flannery's work is a stunning multi-disciplinary synthesis in the same league as Jared Diamond's stupendous 'Collapse.'

The writer is very smart being a professor. He writes at a very high level making this a complex read. Lots of terminology that the reader may not be able to grasp. Very detailed and comprehensive though so it may appeal more to academic types. Not for casual readers. .

This is one of my favorite all time books. I read it many years ago and it stills stands as one of my most memorables.

This is undoubtedly a very detailed and authoritative book for those with deep understanding of environmental issues who would surely give this book five stars. For me it was a difficult read. The lovely Tim Flannery truly cares about his subject

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