The End of the Wild is part of the Boston Review series of books of the MIT (Massachusetts Institute of Technology) press. One of the book’s sleeve notes outlines that the editors hope the series will “establish a public space in which people can loosen the hold of conventional preconceptions and start to reason together across the lines others are so busily drawing” (p.99). This book, although small in size and short in length delivers a powerful message and thus the promise of that sleeve note is delivered.

While I wouldn’t usually present a back story to a book review, I feel in this case one is justified. I came across this book in a campus book shop, so far so normal and predictable. What struck me about it was the title “The End of the Wild”. An intriguing title as being a scholar who sits within the broad field of sustainability I was aware through my studies that there is an argument that the concept of a ‘wild’ that is pristine and untrammeled by humans is nonsense and a purely romantic notion that we hold onto. On the back cover of the book there is a note about the author, Stephen Myer, a professor of political science at MIT (he has now passed away). He is not someone I have ever heard of, and I apologise if I should have. At the time of the book being published he was a professor in politics during George Bush the second’s reign over America (irony intended). This was enough, and my curiosity was piqued - I bought the book. However rather than buying one copy, I bought two, one for myself and one for a colleague.

As indicated above, the book is short and as such it is a quick read, another must for the busy academic, and I read it in two half hour sittings. However, this rapidity in reading is more than made up for in impact. The book leaves an impression, one that persists in time many multiples beyond the hour it takes to read. To indicate, I have been moved to write this review because the book’s messages have been lingering with me for a week and a half (c240 hours). I don’t yet understand impact factor rankings (a new metric for academics), but if a book takes an hour to read and lingers that long, is that an impact factor of 240 (joking)? Prior to writing this
review, I asked my colleague how she had found the book. She indicated that it had made her depressed (is that an increase in impact factor?) and wonder about the whole sustainable development project. Sarcastic musings on impact factors aside that this book has left an impression on me and depressed my colleague would indicate to me that more people should read it.

Although split into seven chapters, given the shortness of the book and thus the chapters, the book reads more as an essay and the arguments flow into one another. The book opens by outlining that our understanding of the earth’s history would lead us to believe that in the past (beyond the last century) the primary forces impacting upon the earth have not been humans and their decisions, rather the forces have been non-human in origin and what some would describe as ‘natural’.\footnote{However “sometime in the last century that changed...[and] today the guiding hand of natural selection is unmistakeably human” (p.3).} From there an argument is built regarding species extinction. Meyer argues that the rate of species extinction is far exceeding the rate that new species are appearing and as such genetic diversity is diminishing and while “the land and the oceans will continue to teem with life... it will be a peculiarly homogenised assemblage of organisms unnaturally selected for their compatibility with one fundamental force: us” (p.4). As such, in this human dominated world, “the web of life will become the strand of life” (p.17) and the keystone species (outside of humans) will be what Meyer terms ‘weedy species’. The term weedy being used descriptively rather than pejoratively to indicate those species that thrive in a human ordered environment, for example; rats, raccoons and dandelions, to name just a few. While these weedy species will thrive, Meyer also indicates that species such as the panda and tigers will continue to exist, albeit with direct human management. Panda’s, for example, will be confined to a category of ‘relic species’ that will continue to survive in zoos, while tigers will continue as a ‘ghost species’, given that more tigers are kept as pets in the USA than are in the jungles of Asia.

Meyer goes on to argue that humanity cannot stop species extinction because the cause of extinction is our growth in numbers and that growth is not about to slow down in the next few decades. Taking this as a leaping off point, Meyer goes on to critique sustainable development. He argues that “sustainable development is an anthropocentric resource-use policy, not an ecological model” (p.54) Hence
sustainable development is in his view about managing consumptive demand against resource supply and this in turn represents the limit of our sustainability, as opposed to the functioning of an ecosystem. Thus we ask ourselves “what is the maximum amount of mahogany, or tuna or leopard pelts that can be harvested and still allow projected human demand for the product to be met for the foreseeable future? The demands of the ecosystem are not truly part of the equation” (p.55). As such Meyer concludes that the extinction crisis is over in so much as mass extinction is unavoidable and weedy species will become dominant. However he also makes clear that this does not mean that we should do nothing and in his words “let nature take its course...[as]...in a world so thoroughly dominated by humanity...neglect will not be benign” (p.73). Rather he proposes that what we have to do is recognise that “the end of the wild is fundamentally about us, not about this thing we call the environment. It is about our cultural norms, our values, and our priorities... [it]... is about how we have chosen to live and how those choices relate to the world around us” (p.74). Further to counter some of the worst losses we should set up what are termed “National Area Trusts’. A concept that is not fully explained but comes across to the reader as large national parks where boundaries are set according to ecosystem functioning as opposed to human requirements. Meyer closes by arguing that in his view “since the invention of the first stone tool, humanity has pounded the wild into a shape that fits its needs... [and that] coexisting with nature has always meant transforming it-consuming it” (p. 89) Thus in the future life will be less diverse, more predictable but perhaps through the fullness of time once the earth is past the “cloud of human selection” (p.77) the wild will return.

As the above précis of the key arguments of the book indicate the content of Meyer’s message is bleak and in this regard my colleague’s depression can perhaps be understood. That bleakness aside, the strength of this book lies in its ability to make the reader consider the centrality of humans as key actors and in so doing it asks the reader to question and re-evaluate what the sustainable development project is and what it is we are trying to save, do or achieve. Thus the book reinforces an understanding that sustainable development is an innately human centric notion, a story about humans for humans - a human survival story. That Meyer’s arguments make this clear and he is provocative in his views makes the book worth a read.
If I had one criticism of Meyer’s narrative it would be that he sets up an antagonistic relationship between humans and nature, with nature being good and humans bad. Further in discussing humans and nature he reinforces notions that humans and nature are ontologically separate categories, thus humans will always be ‘bad’ invaders of ‘good’ nature. This is disappointing, as his outline of human beings as key actors and the implication that we have to carry an imperative of responsibility for our actions is enough. Nevertheless, read, enjoy and consider. Finally, thank you to Professor Meyer for writing a provocative book.

Nick Barter, Griffith Business School
n.barter@griffith.edu.au

1 The term natural is in inverted commas here as I am using it with caution and merely to indicate the non-human. The caution is because I do not want the reader to believe I am setting up a Cartesian split between man and nature, something that Meyer does, which this review indicates.