

THE SKY IS MELTING

By Nicholas Wade

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THE END OF NATURE By Bill McKibben. 226 pp. New York: Random House. \$19.95

When, Milton reports in "Paradise Lost," Adam asked the archangel Raphael to explain the movement of the heavens, he was rebuffed with some frosty words about man dwelling in "An edifice too large for him to fill, / Lodg'd in a small partition, and the rest / Ordain'd for uses to his Lord best known." Bill McKibben, a

frequent contributor to The New Yorker, quotes the put-down with approval at the conclusion of his interesting essay, "The End of Nature." The greenhouse effect is his text, and his moral is that humankind should stick to its small partition, halting its implicit program of polluting, dominating and managing the natural world.

By the end of nature Mr. McKibben means the end of nature as a force independent of man. He sees nature being dominated in two ways. First, the pollution created by human societies has now begun to have global impact. The damage to the life-protecting ozone layer in the stratosphere is one example. The feared climatic warming from the greenhouse effect, which Mr. McKibben considers to be a sure thing, is another.

We may be able to avert disaster by delaying or adapting to the greenhouse warming, just as international action has been taken against the chemicals that chew up the ozone layer. But Mr. McKibben is not happy with this outcome, for it would lead us into managing the globe's climate and into using technologies like genetic engineering, both of which will further erode the independence of nature. This is the second sense in which he believes nature is ending.

Instead of continuing the unchecked materialism of our economic march, Mr. McKibben says, we should now accept limits to our rights over nature, even if that means consuming less. "This could be the epoch when people decide at least to go no farther down the path we've been following - when we make not only the necessary technological adjustments to preserve the world from overheating but also the necessary mental adjustments to ensure that we'll never again put our good ahead of everything else's."

It would be easy to dismiss the thesis as a restatement of the limits-to-growth debate or as yet another instance of how everyone uses the greenhouse effect to promote his own agenda. It is tempting to note the contrast between Mr. McKibben's ascetic message and his easy life style - he tells the reader about his Honda car, his large house in the woods, his heating system, his new fax machine

and his recently purchased telescope. It would be reasonable to argue with his unmitigated trust in the computer models used to predict the greenhouse warming and his exaggeration of the present powers of genetic engineering.

But all such pretexts for dismissing the book would be easy ways of avoiding the hard questions it raises. The economic frame of reference in which most public debate takes place sets no intrinsic value on natural beauty or uniqueness. Unless protected by special laws like the Endangered Species Act, natural habitats almost always yield to the bulldozer. The South Platte River in Colorado would have been dammed, but for the decision of the chief of the Environmental Protection Agency, William K. Reilly, who overrode the routine decisions made by local officials.

Biologists and environmentalists want to save the world's tropical rain forests for one reason - the intrinsic value of these ancient nurseries of life. But they know they won't prevail with that argument. So they point instead to the forests' value to man - the medicinal plants, the lumber, the nuts and fruits, the green lungs that cleanse the air of the carbon dioxide exhaled by industrial civilizations. Mr. McKibben contends there is something wrong with the terms of a debate in which the beauty and uniqueness of the rain forest count for nothing, and he is surely right.

The conventional reply to critics like Mr. McKibben is that prosperity and individual choice are also high values, that economic systems always adapt with unexpected success to scarcity or the constraints imposed by anti-pollution laws and that better or more cleverly applied technology is a surer answer to environmental destruction than repudiating technical advance. The conventional wisdom is probably the right approach to even the greenhouse effect. Yet it may not suffice. If the climate heats up, and if the rate of warming should prove too fast for natural systems to adapt to, then there could be widespread ecological collapse. Mr. McKibben is too glib in assuming this to be an already certain outcome. Most climatologists are unwilling to state that any degree of greenhouse warming has begun. But for a man preaching apocalypse, he speaks in a measured and civilized voice that deserves a hearing. Even those who reject his idea that humans should

not exceed the limits of their small partition may pause to wonder if the balance between man's progress and nature's decline has been struck at the right point.

TOO DARN HOT

The American summer of 1988, when no one talked about anything but the heat and when it would end, was, on average, only a degree or two warmer than what we were used to. But the [computer] models predict summer could soon be 5 or 6 or 7 degrees warmer than the old "normal." Science has yet to devise a way of measuring what percentage of people feel like human beings on any given August afternoon . . . or, for that matter, reckoning the lost wit and civility in a population concerned mainly with keeping its shirts dry. . . . A future full of summers like that is a grim prospect. Summer will come to mean something different - not the carefree season anymore but a time to grit one's teeth and survive. Summer will mean something new in Omaha if the temperature is above 95 degrees fifty days instead of the current thirteen, and in Memphis if it fails to fall below 75 degrees ninety nights a year instead of today's twenty. We can air-condition, of course. . . . Perhaps summer will become the season when no one goes outdoors. From "The End of Nature."

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