



Does it matter if some animal and plant species die out?

Let us approach this question by asking, first, the more dramatic question: Does it matter if all animal and plant species die out? In other words, would the end of the world be important? You might think that, if anything is important, the end of the world is important. But that is not so obvious.

Some philosophers raise the question of whether death matters. The challenge is to show how death can matter to the person who is dead. After all, she is not around to miss her life. It is no answer to say that she has to go through the process of dying first, which can be painful or scary. That only shows that the process of dying can matter to the person going through it. If death is sudden, there is no process of dying. Without the process, how can death matter to the dead person?

It may not matter to the dead person, but doesn't it still matter to those left behind? Usually it does. But this is where we arrive at the challenge of explaining why the end of the world matters. Suppose we all die together and instantaneously. Then nobody is left behind. This seems to prove that the death of all people matters less than the death of one, some, or most people. If we are going to die instantaneously, it is better if we all do, because then there is nobody and nothing left behind to experience the loss and its other nasty consequences. (Think of all the Mad-Max-style 'survivor' stories premised on how much worse it is to be one of those left behind.)

So now we finally get to the question: What if some but not all species die out? Relying on the previous train of thought, one may answer: it doesn't matter to that species. But it matters to those left behind. It can matter in two ways. First, it may affect their own survival chances in a way that matters. If I am a frog, and insects die out, I have nothing to eat and have either a painful death or a stressful period of adaptation to look forward to. Secondly, the loss of a species may affect other parts of the lives of those left behind beyond their mere survival. If dolphins die out we humans have lost a beauty that we used to marvel at, and not merely part of an eco-system that sustained our food sources.

The second consideration seems to apply most to human beings (and other highly-developed species) who are capable of doing fancy things like marvelling at beauty. This suggests another intriguing conclusion. If any species is going to die out, it had better be us. Why? Because other (less-developed) species have less to lose from losing us than we have from losing them. The sharks will lose a food source if we die out, but we will lose both a food source and a source of wonder if they die out. It seems worse if they die out than if we do. By the same logic, it seems worse if all plants die out than if all animals die out. Why? Because all animals need plants but many plants do not need animals.

One suspects that something must have gone wrong with this argument to arrive at such a startling conclusion. But what? Ecologists sometimes talk as if other species matter in themselves, irrespective of whether they matter to us. They can't mean that they matter to themselves, or that they matter to each other. That just seems to repeat the same error. So there must be some kind of mattering, hinted at in this question, that does not involve mattering to anyone in particular. The real challenge is to work out what on earth – or indeed what beyond the earth – this could mean. [640 words]