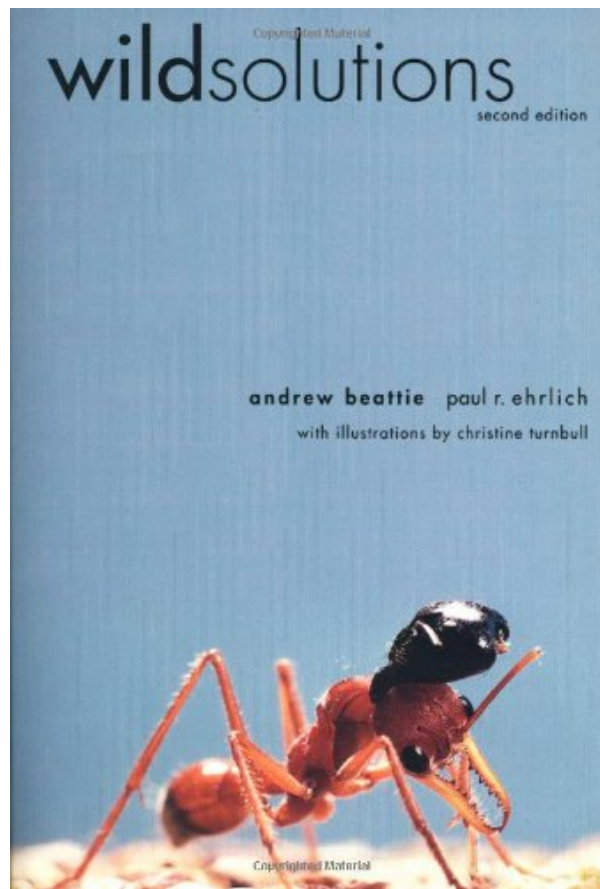
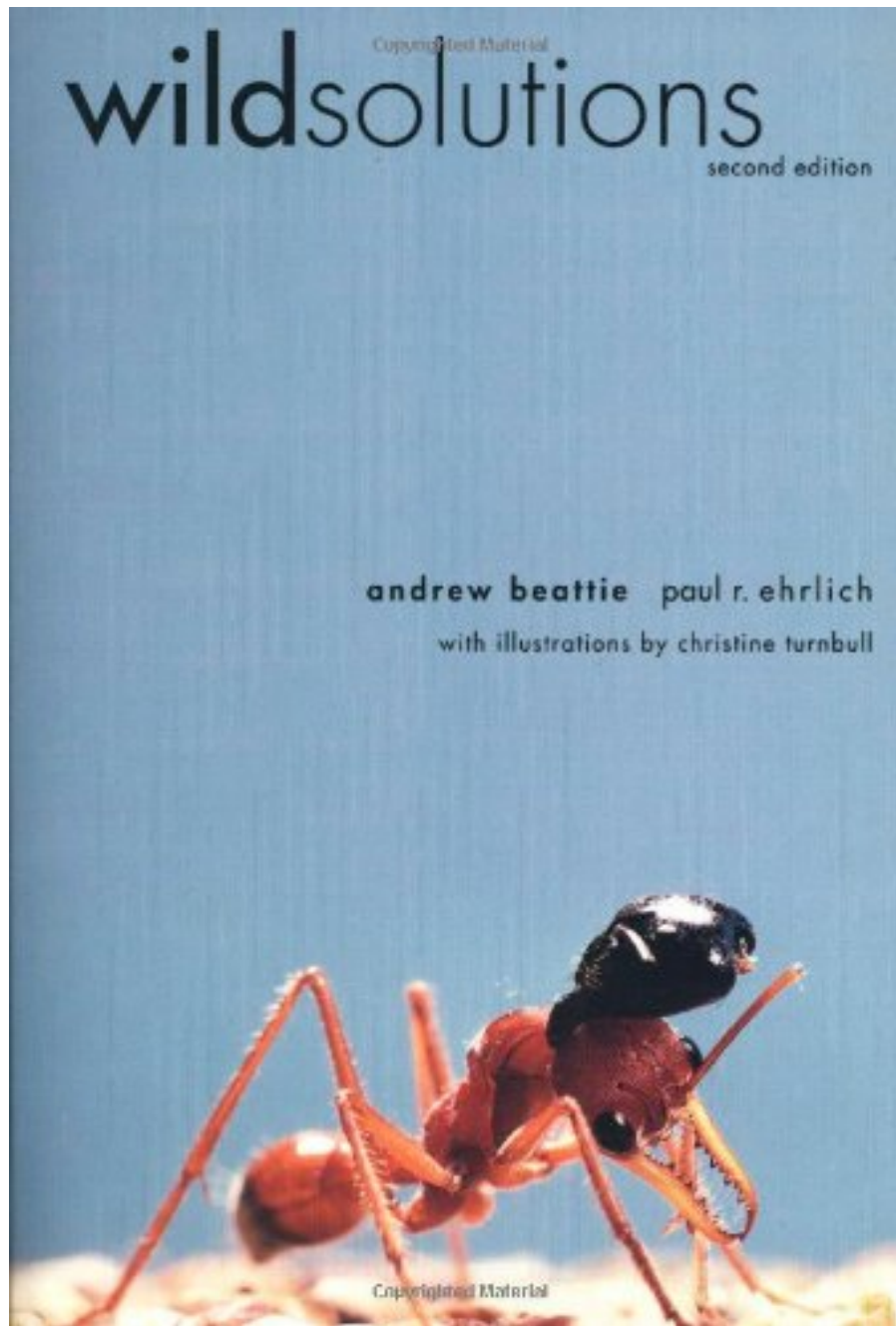


# **WILD SOLUTIONS: HOW BIODIVERSITY IS MONEY IN THE BANK, SECOND EDITION BY ANDREW BEATTIE, PAUL R. EHRLICH**



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We live on an unexplored planet, ignorant of more than eighty percent of the species that share our world. In this fascinating and abundantly illustrated book, two eminent ecologists discuss the biological diversity of the Earth, showing how the natural systems that surround us play an essential role in protecting our basic life-support systems.

Andrew Beattie and Paul Ehrlich tell us about the millions of species providing ecosystem services that maintain the quality of our air and water and the fertility of the soil, dispose of domestic, industrial, and agricultural waste, and protect crops from pests. The authors also describe how biological diversity opens the way for new medicines, pharmaceuticals, construction materials and designs, and manufactured goods. They point to innovative industries that harness species for the biological repair of damaged landscapes, biological mining, biological pest control, and biomonitoring of the environment. The organisms upon which these activities are founded—although often microscopic, obscure, or bizarre—provide natural capital that is worth infinitely more than anyone has previously guessed. The authors urge us to protect the biological wealth of our Earth and keep it from being destroyed by human activity.

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Educating the general public on the value of natural systems

By Dennis Littrell

This book is an attempt to bring to a general readership the idea that solutions to any number of human problems can, and are being, found in the wild. Thus farmers might discover naturally occurring pesticides, perhaps from the leaves of trees; doctors might use antibiotics manufactured by microbes or ants; and engineers, builders and manufacturers might learn how to make the super strong but light weight materials spun out by spiders and worms or secreted by mollusks.

(Or, more realistically, chemical conglomerates, pharmaceutical giants, and construction multinationals might better their bottom line and reduce pollution and the destruction of the environment through the use of ecologically viable solutions.)

The text, written by Australian biologist Andrew Beattie with perhaps more than symbolic assistance from famed population biologist Paul Ehrlich, is unpretentious enough to be accessible to high school students; indeed it seems in some respects, by using a minimum of jargon and technical language, to be aimed at young people. There is an emphasis on the positive aspects of bioremediation and biotechnology rather than sounding any alarm bells about our misuse of the environment. Thus when animals are to be employed as

biological monitors of pollution (as the canary is used in the coal mine) the text assures us that rare or endangered species will not be used. Or when pigs are employed (on islands north of Australia) as sentinel animals that might warn of disease traveling south, we are told that they live in pens under "palm trees that rustle in the balmy sea breezes" and that the pigs "snooze or root about in the sand and coconut husks" and are tossed leftovers by passing villagers several times a day "from the family meal or some other delicacy." (p. 160)

The authors follow the introduction with these important words, "The majority of species on Earth have yet to be discovered." (By the way, those who think that the identification of species is like glorified stamp collecting, as I recently read in some book, are very much mistaken. An accounting of life forms, at the very least, will give us a basis for examining change.) Beattie and Ehrlich follow this up with an exploration of how species live in, on, and with one another, laying the groundwork for an understanding of biodiversity and ecology while showing how dependent we are on the smallest creatures for our survival. They recall the failed Biosphere 2 experiment some years ago in Arizona and use a thought experiment on what we might take to the moon to establish and maintain a natural community, thereby demonstrating beyond any doubt just how complex and connected and dependent are all forms of life. They evoke the concept "the natural internet" to illustrate this interconnectedness and to show how natural cycles, food chains, water and nitrogen cycles, etc., work. Particularly interesting was the chapter on garbage and how the myriad creatures of the soil break down waste and return it to use. The remainder of the book suggests ways that humans can work within natural systems to both our advantage and the advantage of the planet as a whole. It is sorely hoped that this message reaches a lot of people, which is obviously the intent of the authors.

The text is enhanced by appealing black and white illustrations of insects, worms, spiders, microbes, fungi and other living things by Christine Turnbull, done in a way that makes the creatures look almost lovable. Turnbull combines a serious attention to detail with the light touch of a cartoonist. Or at least this is my impression. I imagined, for example, that the immobilized ant on the title page with a fungus growing out of its body had an cartoonist's "x" in its eye; but that was merely a misapprehension; there was no "x." Yet the death of this ant eaten from the inside by a fungus seemed almost benign. Perhaps this is a felicitous way of understanding "nature red in tooth and claw." Furthermore, (and I mean this seriously) maybe if people in general saw ecology in something like the rosy way Disney depicted it in Bambi (but without the distortion) we might be the better for it.

Anyway I admire the attempt by the authors to show how the use of natural products and processes are preferable to the use of artificial and man-made ones whenever possible, and for suggesting the incredible range of what is possible. I wish that all high school students and CEOs of multinational corporations would read this book. Or better yet, heads of state (even dictators and ruling theocrats) and elected representatives whose education has been primarily in law, business and the military, should read this book. Maybe we ought to buy an extra copy and send it to our representative in Washington. Couldn't hurt.

Bottom line: the text is a little pollyannaish at times and the material is familiar to those trained in the life sciences, but the message is an important one, and that message is expressed in a vivid and easily assimilated way. The drawings by Turnbull are wonderful.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

An Outstanding Argument for Conservation

By Gregory McMahan

Wild Solutions is a beautifully written little book containing a well-reasoned, passionate argument for the conservation of all the creatures in the natural world, not just the ones that look cute on T-shirts or postcards. The over riding theme of this book is not that we should save nature because we can make a quick buck off of it; rather, we should save nature because the natural world is one big laboratory, available to humanity free of charge, that not only supports us with a variety of ecosystem services but also continuously shows us new and better ways of living. The message is that species must be conserved because it is impossible to determine which will be vitally important in the future. Humanity tends to judge the worth of a species based



on its value to us now without knowing fully or even considering the role the species may play in nature. We really do not know what species will be important in the future. Moreover, we do not know yet to what extent how important the known species are in ecosystem processes. Too often we learn of the organism's role and importance in ecosystems only after it is gone. One important point of the book is that we do not realize or even appreciate the extent to which we are dependent on the natural world.

As the case of Biosphere Two clearly showed the world, placing a value on the importance of a species without knowing its role in ecosystems and food chains, merely based on arrogant and selfish notions of whether or not we derive some value from it is foolhardy. Biosphere Two also showed us that humanity can not do without Nature, but Nature, given its multi-billion year history, can and has done without us. The authors liken the world's creatures to a natural internet that is responsible for the air that we breathe, the water that we drink, and the rich fertile soil that we depend upon for the food that we eat. All of these gifts from Nature, unfortunately, are being tainted, damaged and destroyed by the greedy and selfish actions of humanity. Although many of the example organisms may not be new to some readers, the way in which these organisms interact, and the way in which Humanity has taken advantage of these interactions to enrich our lives gives all a deeper understanding of the importance of these and other organisms.

While some may criticize the call to save the natural world for economic gain, no one can argue with the authors' assertion that the natural world has served and will continue to serve as a basis for the development of new industries. Nor can it be argued that the natural world will become more important as a springboard for the solution to some of mankind's most pressing problems. While I firmly believe that the preservation of species and habitats solely for present or future economic exploitation is both arrogant and shortsighted, it tends to remain the only way to convince the world powers and corporate sultans to tread lightly around environments and habitats. Such a state of affairs is at once both deplorable and depressing, but I am optimistic that sane minds will rise above the current economically inspired rapacious environmental pillage and eventually prevail.

I fully acknowledge that our callous interference in natural evolutionary processes is a foolish gamble, and this book serves as indisputable proof. Many lifetimes of benefits are waiting to be discovered among Nature's bountiful gifts, and this book inspires me to find a few of them.

7 of 8 people found the following review helpful.

Fascinating reading

By Duwayne Anderson

Beattie and Ehrlich propose that nature represents an enormous reservoir of capital in the form of chemicals and genes that, having evolved over millions of years, can serve people by providing solutions to such things as diseases, better crops, mining, and energy. In support of their thesis, they've written this book, which is filled with dozens of examples of natural solutions for such things as human illnesses and pest control. A secondary and supporting thesis is that natural ecosystems are complex, with hundreds of interdependencies that link sub-populations in the ecosystem in unpredictable ways. As a result, it's often difficult, if not impossible, to predict how a seemingly minor alteration of an ecosystem will ripple through at different levels.

It seems that one of their goals is to encourage the listing of natural ecosystems as valuable assets. Too often, they argue, the true value of natural ecosystems is lost in economic policy, with the serious loss of important natural solutions that might otherwise have greatly benefited humankind. While I agree that natural ecosystems should be appreciated for their capitalistic value, I think the book's arguments are only moderately persuasive in that regard, and unlikely to convince many capitalists to deal more gently, or responsibly, with earth's natural resources. I also think their argument places the environmental movement on a slippery slope. By asserting that natural ecosystems should be protected for their capitalistic value, they open the door to counter arguments that natural systems with limited, or no, capitalistic value need not be protected. I'm personally more persuaded by holistic and ethical arguments, like those of Native American culture, which views humanity as an integral part of nature; a part that cannot remain morally and ethically

whole without showing respect and care for Mother Earth.

However, I'm not so idealistic as to think the Alaska wildlife refuge will be saved by appeals to ethics, beauty, solitude, and spiritual oneness with nature. So, in retrospect, I suppose if Beattie and Ehrlich can convince even a few Texas oil men in the new administration to go easy on the environment "for the money" it will have been worth it.

I didn't buy this book because of its main thesis. I bought it because it is chock full of interesting tidbits and information about how animals interact with each other and their environment. The book is easy to read, captivating, and well written. The illustrations, by Christine Turnbull, are abundant and add considerably to the book. Each is artfully composed in simple black and white with detail and clarity that brings additional insight to the text (there are 40 all together).

In one sense this book might have been called "The Second Earth." There isn't a whole lot about the big animals that people think of. There are no accounts of tigers or bears. Discussions about animals larger than a cat are few. Mostly its about bacteria, beetles, ants, worms, grubs, and things like that. The stories tell how these animals have evolved the most interesting interrelationships, and how the crucible of evolution has resulted in some truly amazing chemical and genetic solutions that animals use - and that we can adapt and use, as well.

Many of the accounts describe how natural solutions can be used to solve problems with crop infestation. Often, the stories illustrate how these natural solutions not only work better, but are also less expensive and less damaging to the environment. One example is found in the story of Opuntia, an ornamental cactus plant that escaped from Australian settlers and infested the countryside. According to the authors, the cost of clearing the land mechanically, or poisoning the plants, was greater than the value of the land itself. Furthermore, the cactus grew so densely that it crowded out indigenous plants. To solve the problem, Australian biologists went to South America to search for natural enemies of Opuntia. The solution turned out to be a cactus-eating moth called *Cactoblastis*, which quickly cleared most of the Opuntia from the countryside.

Another interesting story tells how Australian aborigines would take a cloth and hold it over a nest of bull ants. The ants would swarm over the cloth, whereupon they were shaken from it, and the cloth was then use to bind wounds. These aboriginal people had discovered that wounds bound in such cloth heal without infection. The reason? Bull ants, being social animals, suffer from diseases (much like our social species). To combat the microbe hordes, bull ants have evolved antibiotics that coat their bodies. Their swarming bodies transfer some of this antibiotic to the cloth, which then serves to protect the wound.

Overall, this is a great book, but I wish the authors had included references for some of the things they discuss. Several times I found myself beating back feelings of genuine aggravation when the authors would make claims, with no way to verify or expand on them through chapter endnotes. They do, however, have a generic list of recommended reading material and a useful index at the end of the book.

If you find nature fascinating, and love to read a well-written book on the subject, then I heartily recommend this one. It will make you think, and more than once, while reading it, I'm sure you will say, "Gee, I never knew that! How interesting."

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