

## PROLOGUE

In the pages of this book, Philip Silverstone-Sopkin brings to us the natural history of lovely plants barely surviving at the edge of extinction in fragments of vegetation scattered across the heavily agricultural Cauca Valley of Colombia, a country with an incredibly rich endowment of biodiversity. The situations he describes call to our attention the plight of the many other species around the world that are likely to be lost permanently during the course of this century. Seven billion of us, each striving to consume more and more, unwilling to give up unsustainable technologies to attain a healthy, peaceful, and harmonious coexistence with the nature that supports us – collectively, we have an impact on the Earth that already greatly exceeds the capacity of our planetary home to sustain, one that is growing with each passing year. There are three people living today for each that was here when I was born in the mid 1930s, and for the most part each of us considers himself a unique exception – deserving individually a large and ever-increasing share of what the world can provide.

We have little idea of how many kinds of bacteria share the world with us, but can estimate that there are at least 12 million kinds of other organisms, of which we have named fewer than two million. There are perhaps 425,000 kinds of land plants, mostly very poorly known and many still awaiting discovery. Since we base our very existence on plants and other organisms and depend on them to help us achieve sustainability (using no more than what the world can produce on an ongoing basis), our mostly unconscious decimation of their numbers and of their genetic diversity spells nothing less than disaster for ourselves and those who come after us, especially considering the 2 to 2.5 billion more people projected to be added to our numbers over the course of the next 40 years, the great majority of them

unavoidably fated to be existing at the very poorest, hungriest, and most needy fringes of society.

The global economic crisis seems at least partly to have awakened people to the fact that we depend on one another, and that no nation, no matter how great its resources and its power, can thrive indefinitely in imagined isolation. To save the biodiversity that is of such fundamental importance to us, we need to work together to create a world of social justice, of mutual support based on respecting one another in our full range of diversity, of sharing, and of sacrifice. The world is not coming to an end, nor are we as a species teetering on the edge of extinction, but we are in the course of deciding how diverse, how beautiful, how rich, and how wonderful a place the world will be in the future, and how extensive the opportunities available for those who follow us will be. The pervasive conversion of tropical ecosystems and of Southern Hemisphere lands by technologies developed under very different conditions have created all too many situations like the one described in this book. Out of respect for our single planetary home and a desire to deliver the world in as sound a condition as possible to our children and to theirs, we must do better, work harder, and go beyond the limits of what we may consider possible individually and collectively. In that effort of such transcendent importance, a consideration of this volume and what it represents will inspire us greatly.

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