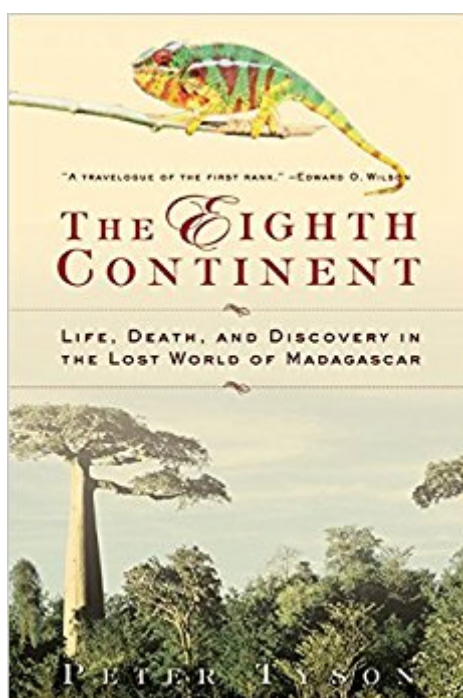


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The Eighth Continent:: Life, Death, And Discovery In The Lost World Of Madagascar



Synopsis

Madagascar, the world's fourth-largest island, is a land where lizards scream and monkey-like lemurs sing songs of inexpressible beauty. Where animals and plants that went extinct elsewhere millions of years ago -- tenrecs, fossa, upside-down trees -- thrive in a true Lost World. Where the ancestors of the Malagasy, as the island's eighteen tribes are collectively known, come alive in rollicking ceremonies known as "turning the bones." Here, join Peter Tyson on a diverting odyssey with four scientists out to plumb the natural and cultural mysteries of this extraordinary land.

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Customer Reviews

Peter Tyson is on-line producer of NOVA, the PBS science series. A science writer for seventeen years, he has written for the Atlantic Monthly, the New York Times, and other magazines and newspapers. He lives in Arlington, Massachusetts, with his wife and three children.

About 15 years ago, I had a conversation with a Malagasy soil scientist, who told me, in an even tone, that his countrymen were destroying their watershed by extending rice cultivation into the forests. I forget his exact words, but they were a version of a statement I have often quoted from Harry Hopkins: "People don't eat in the long run, they eat every day." It sounded as if the island was being set up for a demographic collapse similar to the one that affected Ireland in the 19th century, and the concern about preserving an island watershed resonated as well, since I, too, live on an island with a watershed that is deteriorating. But I did not rush out to help the Malagasy save themselves from themselves, nor even make any effort to learn more about their situation. They are,

after all, as Neville Chamberlain said about the Czechs, a distant people of whom we know nothing. Besides, at that time Peter Tyson had not published his excellent "The Eighth Continent," which while formally a report about conservation studies by westerners in Madagascar is practically a very long encyclopedia article about the island. A magazine writer with a taste for hiking, Tyson made a number of visits to field research projects in the '90s, each lasting at least long enough to do some observation on his own. These reports are woven deftly into reports from earlier travelers concerning the anthropology, political history, natural history, economic activity etc. of the island over the past couple of hundred years. There is some material about earlier times, though sketchy, as the Malagasy did not write until Christian missionaries reduced their language to paper less than 200 years ago. Since they were in contact by -- and partly descendants of -- Arabs, this illiteracy is surprising, but then, most things about Madagascar are surprising. It had the world's largest birds and all the lemurs. One of the surprising things about this book is how little there is in it about lemurs, the charismatic animal group of the island today. It is a meaty volume nevertheless, as much for what it does not say as for what it does. For example, in travels all over the island, Tyson never reports encountering a policeman, and virtually no representative of central government of any kind in the rural areas. The place is so poor as to be effectively ungoverned; even if the government had any interest, it has no resources. Tyson finds the people attractive and kind, though wary, although their history is extremely violent, and given the lack of any order-making authority, appears to be very violent still. A cover blurb from Discover magazine describes the book as "part field report, part travelogue," but this does not really capture its range. It does read like a travelogue of the better sort. I am mistrustful of travelogue writers, having found that all that I have checked up on are liars, but the only obvious error that I found in the whole book was a reference to the "heady scent of blossoming bougainvillea." The first 90 percent of the volume is expository in tone, but there is bite in the final pages, in which Tyson exposes the entire conservationist project -- with which he obviously has deep sympathy -- to a searching critique. This is fair-minded of him and so unexpected given the tone of most green literature of the past decade ("The Eighth Continent" just makes it into this dismal decade, having been published in 2000). Tyson says some have called Madagascar an eighth continent because it is so big (as big as Texas, or, as we have recently learned to think of these things, as Afghanistan), and because of its long isolation it possesses (or once possessed) a true continent's worth of characteristic plants and animals. Nevertheless, it is still an island and still subject to the harsh constraints of island biogeography. Should the people of Texas or Afghanistan eat themselves out of house and home, they can retreat to Oklahoma or Iran. The Malagasy have no place to go.

I have come away from this book with a strong desire to visit Madagascar and a good understanding of the country's wonders and challenges. In a very entertaining style recounting his travels and sharing tales of the island's lore, Peter Tyson gives us an overview of both the Malagasy people and fauna (and sometimes flora) and how they relate in light of its conservation issues. He also outlines the limited knowledge that exists as to how this unique island has come to be so different from anywhere else on Earth, opening the scope for unlimited wonder and whetting a thirst to find out more. A great starting point for an interest in Madagascar and a thoroughly enjoyable read. I would recommend reading Mike Eveleigh's, *Maverick in Madagascar*, after this.

I hate to disagree with the majority of the reviews, but I only found this book "okay." It's worth reading but it's not to rave about. The best parts deal with the Malagasy people, culture and history. The descriptions of the animals, plants, and ecosystems are weak. There are few photos and those are not highly informative or high quality. I recommend sections of David Quammen's book, *Song of the Dodo*, which has a much stronger biological bent to it.

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