

Catastrophic Thinking: Extinction and the Value of Diversity

A TALK BY DAVID SEPKOSKI

Thursday, October 20, at 4 pm in room 4020 HSSB



Why do we care about preserving biodiversity? At the beginning of the 21st century biodiversity has come to be seen as fragile and tenuous, constantly endangered by the threat of loss. Extinction plays a central role in this understanding of biodiversity. Whereas most historians who have examined this phenomenon have placed the modern biodiversity movement in the context of a history of conservation biology and endangered species protection, I want to frame it in a new perspective. This talk will examine the influence of biological theories about the nature and dynamics of extinction—and especially mass extinction—on the current valuation of biological diversity. I will focus particularly on the ways that new understandings of extinction in the past—for example, the extinction of the dinosaurs—have converged with scientific and cultural anxieties about the present—the specters of global warming, nuclear war, and biodiversity loss. I will argue that this new model of extinction has played a prominent conceptual and rhetorical role in debates surrounding the current biodiversity crisis, which I will examine in critical historical perspective.

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