



DISCUSSION GUIDE

1. “That long-term relationship between our species and wild animals in North America, which includes human-driven losses of other species in our deep history and staggeringly selfish and myopic destruction in our much more recent past, is an uncomfortable reveal about our species and our time on the planet. But our future demands we look it in the eye, look ourselves in the eye, and face this particular American story” (p. 6). What most surprised you in reading about the overwhelming impact of humans on other species?
2. Dan Flores writes about the “rich linkages” between humans and animals in Native traditions. Does your culture have similar mythologies or philosophies grounded in respect and communion with the animal world? How well do you know the stories and sacred characters of your ancestors?
3. Do you agree with Flores’s assertion that “we almost never act as if we’re another of Earth’s animals” (p. 10)? What movements or events in your lifetime work to contradict this?
4. “Because it draws a bigger circle around time and subjects, Big History has advantages over conventional history. It can acknowledge that the destiny of a continent like North America lies not just with us but also with our fellow creatures and the larger evolutionary stream in which we all swim” (p. 10). Did you come to this work familiar with what Flores calls “Big History”? Do you agree with his claim that it allows for a deeper understanding and connection rather than a more narrow historical focus would?
5. “Our full awakening amid the rich life of the planet also bequeathed to humanity an undertow of wonder and fascination for other creatures in Earth’s evolutionary stream. The late Harvard scientist E. O. Wilson has called this core human value biophilia, which he defined as a genetic memory of our emergence, a piercing love affair with the other life-forms that surround us on the planet” (p. 11). Do you feel this in your life? What creatures draw your closest attention and reverence?
6. How does *Wild New World* continue the conversation begun in Henry David Thoreau’s *Thoughts from Walden Pond* and Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*?
7. “Bringing fire, the flickering agent of destruction and creation, under control. Exploring a world more vast than any hominin could imagine. And killing other creatures, cooking and eating their flesh. How could these protohumans not develop some sense they were superior to all they beheld, a master life-form in a world brimming with creatures now delivered into their grasp” (p. 41)? Beyond its impact on the animal world, where else can you see the effects of this false sense of superiority in contemporary life?
8. Flores notes that the Massachusetts colony passed the first wildlife law in American history: “a one-penny bounty on wolves, the first extermination attempt of a great many to come” (p. 135). Why do you think European colonists felt such a compulsion to destroy these ancient American predators? How did the common misunderstanding of wolves as “vicious efficient monsters of the kill, routinely murdering prey merely for fun” (p. 134) seal their fate?



- 9.** In chapter 3, Flores writes about a moment when he was jogging in the outback of Montana and he could imagine with great clarity the visceral experience of the ancient buffalo-jump. Have you ever had a similar experience of being in a particular landscape or location and feeling intimately connected to the land and the many people who came before us? If so, where were you?
- 10.** Flores presents various theories about what contributed to the Pleistocene extinctions in chapter 2. What did you find most compelling? Do you sympathize with the impulse to try and minimize humans role in those extinctions? What lessons do we miss out on by doing so?
- 11.** “You should understand this about colonial America. The loss of human life and rebound of animal life set up much of our subsequent story. As Native populations collapsed and struggled to rebuild, and wildlife numbers soared in response, new peoples from distant shores were replacing the ancient inhabitants and becoming Americans. They saw all this freshly released abundance of wild creatures in terms of the main chance. Here was money to be made” (p. 139). This is a sobering thought. Do you agree?
- 12.** What was your overall feeling upon finishing this book? Angry? Hopeful? What do you think Flores meant by the closing words “Know the heaven and earth that was, but experience the world that is” (p. 398)?
- 13.** “We all exist in a world handed down by the prior occupants. Like coming generations, who will have to live with a planet our generations have overheated, we, too, suffer from the selfishness of those who lived before us” (p. 8). What impact, or not, has reading this book had on the choices you make in your day-to-day life?
- 14.** The passage of the Endangered Species Act in 1973 was a remarkable and unprecedented attempt to halt the horrific four-hundred-year destruction of wildlife. While not without controversy or political battling, do you think it can be considered successful at “bringing back the wild diversity that once made this country the envy of the globe” (p. 373)?
- 15.** Flores regularly includes personal anecdotes in this history. Do you like this mix of natural history, science, and personal reflection?
- 16.** What themes or lessons did you expect to explore in reading about the interconnected history of humans and animals? Did this book ultimately challenge or reinforce those expectations?