

## **E.O. Wilson – Father of Modern Biodiversity Science**

By Ole Hendrickson

Professor E. O. Wilson of Harvard University is a world-renowned biologist, author, and the father of modern biodiversity science. At the age of 82 Wilson remains an active and provocative thinker, writing about biodiversity and about how human interaction with nature shapes personal and social development.

I recently “sat in on” a lecture that Wilson delivered from his office at Harvard through a video conference link to a packed house in the auditorium of the Royal Botanical Gardens in Burlington. The talk was simultaneously video-linked to Nagoya, Japan where delegates from countries around the world were attending the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity. He answered questions from both Nagoya and Burlington. Wilson startled an official from Mozambique, saying he was delighted to meet him as he will be on a scientific expedition to that country and hoped to see him there soon.

Wilson challenged religious leaders to help slow the extinction crisis – the loss of over two billion years of evolutionary history of life on Earth. He admitted this is difficult in the United States, where half the population thinks evolution is a myth. He said that the response to his book, *The Creation :An Appeal to Save Life on Earth*, was not what he'd hoped. In the book, a scientist appeals to a Southern Baptist preacher – even if you believe that God created the world a few thousand years ago, don't we still have a responsibility to care for God's creation? During his lecture Wilson remarked, “Humans have a dangerous combination of stone-age emotions, medieval governance institutions, and space-age technologies.”

One of Wilson's most influential recent books, *Biophilia*, examines the innate fascination of human beings with all types of living creatures and landscapes. Wilson illustrates this with his own experiences as a field biologist. He argues that close contact with nature is essential for our personal development and ability to work with others as productive members of society. Richard Louv's excellent book, *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*, further explores this theme, inspiring efforts to reinstate outdoor education as part of educational curricula throughout North America.

Wilson has spent much of his professional career studying ants, a highly diverse group of insects who occupy a wide array of habitats and exhibit highly complex social organizations. He once remarked that Karl Marx's ideas would work fine if applied to ants rather than people. He reminded people in Ontario that Canada is full of interesting groups of organisms worthy of biodiversity research. He said that if he was a young Canadian scientist he would consider tackling lichens, given the many species found in our vast boreal forests.

Coincidentally, the Council of Canadian Academies released a report last week warning of serious loss of biodiversity science expertise in Canada. Professional taxonomists able to identify and describe species are disappearing along with the species themselves. The Council noted, in particular, that that the federal committee charged with identifying endangered species in Canada could find no qualified lichen specialists and had to seek expertise from outside the country.

Ontario's Biodiversity Education and Awareness Network, which organized Wilson's lecture, is aiming to increase awareness and understanding of biodiversity, its benefits and threats, and what each of us can do to support it. It has excellent resources on its web site ([www.biodiversityeducation.ca](http://www.biodiversityeducation.ca)) - a great starting point for people who want to support this work.