

Book Review:
Rise of the Necrofauna

Description

Britt Wray does a masterful job in her new book published by Greystone books of Vancouver

Reviewed by **Georges R. Dupras**

For years science has quietly invested in re-creating species that are now extinct. This is done through genetic editing, and the day is not far off when the Asian elephant may share its already fragmented and dwindling ranges with something akin to a woolly mammoth. Proponents of 'De-extinction' argue that their mission is "to enhance biodiversity through the genetic rescue of endangered and extinct species". They believe that gene-editing, cloning and select breeding might restore depleted ecosystems.



In her book, Britt Wray looks at the benefits and pitfalls that lie beneath this controversial direction. To be certain, there are benefits in genetic study, particularly in the area of the neuromuscular diseases and stem-cell research – but there are also serious ethical questions to be asked about the re-introduction of synthetic organisms. Why are we fascinated by de-extinction? When does the process of extinction begin? Why do we mourn the loss of species?

Britt Wray, a PhD in Science communication, specializing in synthetic biology at the University of Copenhagen asks why are we doing this? How will the re-created species impact on similar natural organisms and the habitats they share? Who will own the patent on a cloned species? What of the jurisdictional challenges? What of the ethical considerations?

The focus species are the Asian elephant and the Woolly Mammoth as they have only about 1.4 million specific genetic differences and the entire genome is made-up of several billion bases. That said, it is presumed that if successful, the Asian elephant will be the surrogate mother. If so, asks the author, recognizing the complex, emotional, social and matriarchal structure of both species, who will teach the young woolly mammoth the fundamentals of being a woolly mammoth, and not an elephant?

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The book asks if we should promote the public's fascination for synthetic organisms, rather than invest in protecting the unmodified creatures that are still around but facing threats. Where will we put these animals in a world of diminishing habitats, and how will this impact on carrying capacity? One possibility suggested by scientists would be to re-introduce the Woolly Mammoth, or at least the facsimile, to its old ranges far to the north of present elephant



habitats. If the numbers re-introduced are sufficient, scientists believe they can slow down climate change by protecting the thermo frost.

They speak of managing these hybrids but stop short of saying how. Scientists believe that they can control research, but the reality suggests that deep pockets govern that aspect. These backroom interests also control the patents.

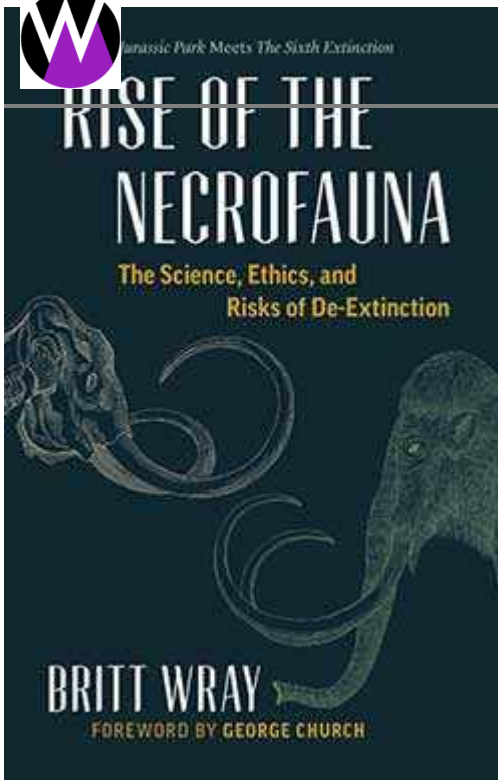
On reading this book one is compelled to ask, what role, if any, large multinational food conglomerates are playing. Are we merely producing more exotic trophies for the Big Game lobby, or adding to the menus of 'foodies', always searching for a new "flavour of the day" – Woolly steak anyone?

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One scenario suggests that a lumber company may clear-cut

an entire forest of old-growth. They could then justify the loss of a dependent species (spotted owls) using the argument that they will revive and restore the species when the second growth in the forest reaches some semblance of maturity. They could then boast job creation and conservation as part of their protocol.



Britt Wray gives us an example of how much zoos are willing to pay for yet

another attraction to prime their turnstiles. In this example, one synthetic biologist is taken out to lunch which included a \$7,000.00 bottle of wine as an incentive. How much are the innocent willing to shell-out to see replicas of extinct species and landscapes? After all, this hybrid isn't really a Woolly Mammoth, merely one very confused and hairy Woollyphant (M) or Elimmoth (F). Though not asked, the reader is compelled to wonder at what point genetic editing, select breeding and cloning will be the basis for human reproduction. Does the ability to resurrect extinct species not encourage our present self-serving and wasteful lifestyles?

This book brings into question the motivation behind some research, and is well worth reading. Anyone concerned about our natural environment and human ethics should read Britt Wray's *Rise of the Necrofauna*.

Feature image: illustrations by Iga Kosicka

Read also: [Questioning the ethics of de-extinction](#)



For over fifty years **Georges R. Dupras** has advocated for animals. He is a member of the International Association for Bear Research and Management (IBA), a Director of the Animal Alliance of Canada (AAC), Quebec



Representative of Zoocheck Canada and past Board member of the Canadian SPCA.

He worked on the original Save the Seal campaign in 1966 that culminated in the founding of the International Fund for Animal Welfare (IFAW) in 1969. He has published two books including Values in Conflict and the eBook Ethics, a Human Condition. Georges currently lives in Montreal, Canada.



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