

Loren Eiseley: Nature's Advocate

Michaela A. Klesitz

Throughout the course of history, philosophers and anthropologists have inspired the human race and stirred the senses of civilization. They have pondered universal questions pertaining to the creation of mankind and humanity's place in the universe. One such philosopher was Loren Eiseley, whose ideas about civilization's cohabitation with nature pay homage to his Nebraska roots and continue to inspire the masses decades after his death.

The Nebraska prairie is a stunning region of the Midwest and is rich with biodiversity. Organisms ranging from the goldenrod plant to the red fox roam the Nebraska terrain. It was organisms like these that inspired Loren Eiseley, one of Nebraska's great twentieth century naturalists. As a young boy living on the outskirts of Lincoln, Nebraska, Eiseley took a great interest in the natural world. He would spend hours exploring the creek banks and caves that surrounded his home. The dynamic aspect of nature fascinated the young Eiseley. After teaching himself to read, he consumed himself in literature and spent hours poring over nature books.

It wasn't until the mid-1940's that Eiseley began to attract national attention. His various essays began to shape the way people thought about the creation of mankind. *The Immense Journey* is one of Eiseley's most influential works. It is a collection of writings detailing the history of humanity. While reading *The Snout*, I was inspired by Eiseley's perception of nature and mankind. As he described the anomalous, yet beautiful, silhouette of the octopus, he evaluated its shape in retrospect to evolution. Eiseley wrote: "It is true some creatures are odd, but I find the situation rather heartening otherwise. It gives one a feeling of confidence to see nature still busy with experiments, still dynamic... There are other things growing in the oceanic vat. It pays to know this. It pays to know there is just as much future as past. The only thing that doesn't pay is to be sure of man's own part in it." His words successfully took my breath away as I contemplated their meaning. Through Eiseley's eyes, I saw the beauty of every creature that walks the earth. With passing time comes inevitable change. The evolutionary change that gradually transforms our planet ensures a future rich with biodiversity and a past that forever impacts the existence of the living.

Loren Eiseley's understanding of the natural world is also exemplified through his essay *How the Flowers Changed the World*. In his essay, Eiseley shrewdly balances his passion for the beauty of living things with evidence of their contributions to the earth. Eiseley theorized that flowers not only beautified the earth, but they also drastically altered the fate of humanity. In his essay he wrote: "Flowers changed the face of the planet. Without them, the world we know-even man himself- would never have existed. Francis Thompson, the English poet, once wrote that one could not pluck a flower without troubling a star. Intuitively he had sensed like a naturalist the enormous interlinked complexity of life." Eiseley further supported his theory by detailing how all organisms necessitate high oxygen consumption in concentrated forms. It is flowering plants that supply the energy for many earthly organisms to survive. Eiseley's unique perspective of the "complexity of life" conveys a deep message of interconnectedness throughout the biological spectrum. The idea that the fate of man rests on the oxygenating power of flowering plants is exceedingly profound. Eiseley had a strong belief that nature and man are one with each other. The existence of one relies heavily on the other. He believed that all living things are complex and beautiful, each with their respective role in nature.

In *Man of the Future*, the role of man is outlined by Eiseley. The majority of the essay is his evaluation of the skull and facial features of modern man in comparison to apes. He also compares and contrasts the striking similarities and differences between the skull of humans today and humans that roamed the earth ages ago. Eiseley also conveyed a dissatisfaction for man's preoccupation with violence and the future. He wrote: "The need is not really for more brains, the need is now for a gentler, a more tolerant people than those who won for us against the ice, the tiger, and the bear. The hand that hefted the ax, out of some old blind allegiance to the past fondles the machine gun as lovingly. It is a habit man will have to break to survive, but the roots go very deep." Eiseley believed that man should not preoccupy themselves with the future, but learn to appreciate the past and live in the present. He also stressed the importance of living in harmony with all creatures of the earth. I firmly stand behind Eiseley's convictions. The fate of man rests in his own hands, as does the fate of the world.

Loren Eiseley's passion for nature and the Nebraska prairie grew into an illustrious career as one of Nebraska's most celebrated naturalists. His message of compassion for all organisms and humanity's place in the universe transcends all social barriers. His message details embracing the beauty of the natural world and discerning one's place in the universe. All organisms are divinely interconnected and all depend on each other for survival. Eiseley's message of harmonic cohabitation between species will continue to impact future generations. As time passes and species evolve, Eiseley's message will remain unchanged.