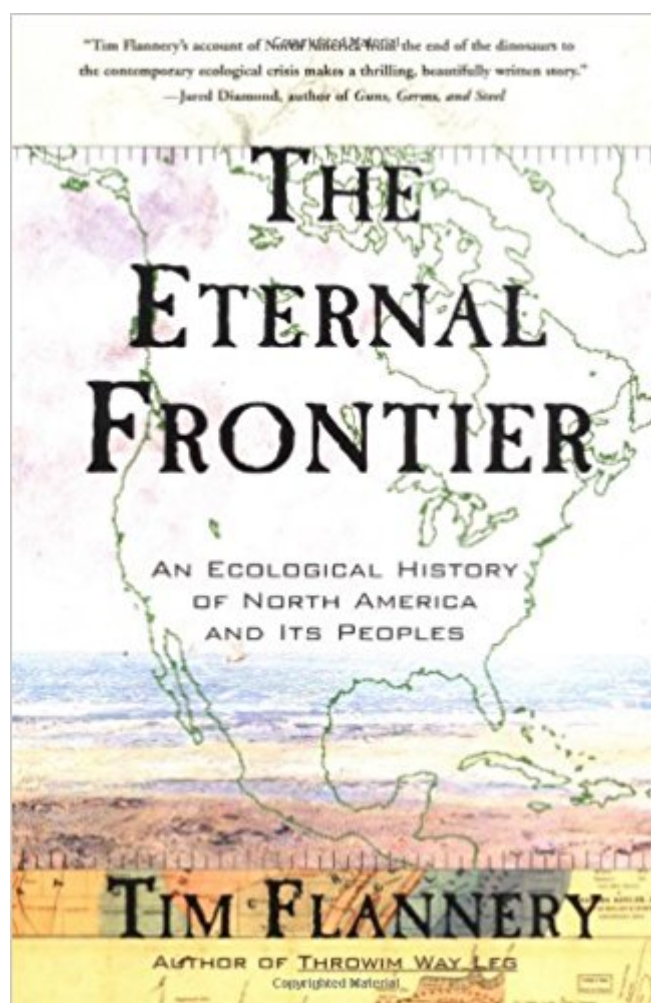


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# The Eternal Frontier: An Ecological History Of North America And Its Peoples



## Synopsis

In *The Eternal Frontier*, world-renowned scientist and historian Tim Flannery tells the unforgettable story of the geological and biological evolution of the North American continent, from the time of the asteroid strike that ended the age of dinosaurs 65 million years ago, to the present day. Flannery describes the development of North America's deciduous forests and other flora, and tracks the immigration and emigration of various animals to and from Europe, Asia, and South America, showing how plant and animal species have either adapted or become extinct. The story takes in the massive changes wrought by the ice ages and the coming of the Indians, and continues right up to the present, covering the deforestation of the Northeast, the decimation of the buffalo, and other facets of the enormous impact of frontier settlement and the development of the industrial might of the United States. Natural history on a monumental scale, *The Eternal Frontier* contains an enormous wealth of fascinating scientific details, and Flannery's accessible and dynamic writing makes the book a delight to read. This is science writing at its very best -- a riveting page-turner that is simultaneously an accessible and scholarly trove of incredible information that is already being hailed by critics as a classic. "Tim Flannery's account ... will fascinate Americans and non-Americans alike." -- Jared Diamond, author of *Guns, Germs, and Steel* "No one before Flannery ... has been brave enough to tackle the whole pageant of North America." -- David Quammen, the *New York Times Book Review* "Tim Flannery's book will forever change your perspective on the North American continent ... Exhilarating." -- John Terborgh, *The New York Review of Books* "Full of engaging and attention-catching information about North America's geology, climate, and paleontology." -- Patricia Nelson Limerick, the *Washington Post Book World* "Natural history par excellence." -- Kirkus Reviews (starred review) "This gutsy Aussie may have read our landscape and ecological history with greater clarity than any native son." -- David A. Burney, *Natural History* "A fascinating, current, and insightful look at our familiar history from a larger perspective." -- David Bezanson, *Austin-American Statesman* "The scope of [Flannery's] story is huge, and his research exhaustive." -- Lauren Gravitz, *The Christian Science Monitor*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Reading *The Eternal Frontier* might be the closest you'll get to taking a class from Tim Flannery--and that alone makes it an opportunity just too good to pass up. This ambitious retelling of North America's dramatic ecological history grew out of a course that Flannery taught at Harvard surveying the continent's ancient past up to its tumultuous near-present: from the extraterrestrial "death-dealing visitor" that struck 65 million years ago all the way through to the tidal invasions, adaptations, and extinctions that have washed over North America since, each idiosyncratically influenced by an ever-changing geology, geography, and climate. Flannery admirably balances his twin roles as scientist and storyteller. As a thoughtful teacher, he employs memorable and effective examples to illustrate broader topics, but he's also willing to commit to theoretical explanations (with fair warning) when necessary to thread together the narrative. But Flannery's greatest strength might simply be the empathy he inspires as a fellow human being trying to sort out an intricate, often richly beautiful puzzle. It's hard not to identify with his curiosity and enthusiasm, whether he's recalling memories of late nights spent as a child reading the *How and Why Book of Prehistoric Mammals* (and the unthoughtful nightmares that followed) or just marveling over the vast American West from his window seat on a plane. *The Eternal Frontier* certainly leaves you with a solid outline of the how, why, and when of North America's enigmatic ecology, and what the implications of a dwindling frontier have for our future. But don't be surprised when what you remember best are Flannery's countless details--worthy of repeating at any self-respecting pub--from marsupial sperm that swim in pairs to the reason that Native American cultures might owe their very existence to squirrels' taste in nuts. --Paul Hughes --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

If Nature itself has a nature, it's the desire for balance. In a fascinating chronicle of our continent's evolution, Flannery shows, however, that this desire must forever be frustrated. Flannery starts his tale with the asteroid collision that destroyed the dinosaurs, ends with the almost equally cataclysmic arrival of humankind and fills the middle with an engaging survey of invaders from other

lands, wild speciation and an ever-changing climate, all of which have kept the ecology of North America in a constant state of flux. We see the rise of horses, camels and dogs (cats are Eurasian), the rapid extinction of mammoths, mastodons and other megafauna at the hands of prehistoric man, and the even quicker extinction of the passenger pigeon and other creatures more recently. Flannery also spotlights plenty of scientists at work, most notably one who tries to butcher an elephant as a prehistoric man would have butchered a mastodon, and another who had the intestinal fortitude to check whether meat would keep if a carcass were stored at the bottom of a frigid pond, the earliest of refrigerators. This material might be dense and academic in another's hands, but Flannery displays a light touch, a keen understanding of what will interest general readers and a good sense of structure, which keeps the book moving, manageable and memorable. (May)Forecast: Atlantic Monthly clearly intends to build on the reputation Flannery attained with his previous, highly acclaimed book, *Throwim Way Leg* and they may have a winner here. The first printing will be 60,000 copies, with a \$100,000 promotional budget and a 21-city author tour. Copyright 2001 Cahners Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Library Binding edition.

This book provides an ecological history of North America from the asteroid that killed the dinosaurs until the present. Flannery emphasizes the events that make North America distinctive - the fact that the asteroid hit the continent at a destructive angle, the effects of the north-south mountain ranges channeling Arctic and tropical air back and forth, the more severe ice ages, and the opening and closing of the Bering land bridge, for example. He's at his best when he's telling big stories over millions of years. The book is weaker when he gets to people, especially after 1492. It's tempting for an ecologist to trace regional differences in culture to regional ecologies, but the result exaggerates effects such as tobacco on Virginian culture or the ecological foundations of Puritanism in New England. Even those chapters are thought-provoking, but I found them generally less convincing and less interesting. That said, the book is very well written, and displays impressive knowledge of long periods of time. Definitely worth a read for the general non-fiction reader.

The readability is astounding; Flannery is such a gifted storyteller. More importantly, the "stories" are based on an extensive list of scientific references, many of which I can vouch for myself. Even more importantly, the text is annotated with wonderful footnotes--listed not on the bottom of each page, which interrupts reading flow, but at the back of the book. I love this book as a Native

American and an evolutionary biologist. Beginning with Chicxulub and continent building, the book follows vegetational and faunal changes over 65 million years in North America, painting wonderful pictures of distinct locales in the past. My students love it, and they come to better understand the implications of today's environmental changes related to resource depletion, habitat destruction, and impacts on animals' and our own habitable spaces. The book needs no substantial updating from 2001 when first published, but I hope an updating is in the works over the next decade of environmental change, so I can continue to use it in my college courses. Readability is excellent for any thoughtful reader.

Excellent book. must admit it is a little over my head on some of the technical information and jargon, but very informative and interesting.

A University of Virginia senior introduced me to *The Eternal Frontier* when he had an unexpected stop over in Chicago. He was excited about it and so I purchased it from . I became excited too because Flannery presents an opportunity for academic laymen to consider conflicting academic explanations and predictions for history of the arrival of fauna of the Americas, when and why some (Mammoths, bison and humans) died and the effects of multiple frontiers on the current population of animals and men.

Since it covers almost 70 million years of history, this book necessarily avoids a lot of detail in most cases. There's not a lot of explanation of some concepts, or even of some creatures that are referred to. I'd have liked to have seen it as a large-format illustrated book with graphics showing exactly what is referred to, whether it be creatures, or even to illustrate a description of how continents moved over time. One of the valuable features of the book is that the author is an Australian. He doesn't share the assumptions and prejudices that most North Americans have (I am a citizen of the USA), and doesn't hesitate to kick around ideas such as re-introducing elephants to replace the mammoths and mastodons we have lost. This is particularly evident in his strong criticism of the American tradition of exploiting the land for all it is worth. He does do a good job of illustrating the dramatic effects that people, even primitive ones, have on an ecosystem. And he pointed out some key recurring things that have repeatedly affected North America over millions of years--Such as how our physical geography affects our weather, and what this means for the plants and animals that live here. Or even the remarkable effect squirrels have had on plants, and on the hunter-gatherer cultures here!! I believe that reading the book is going to actually make a long-term

change in how I think about many things. Not a common thing to happen. I highly recommend the book, though I suspect many readers will want to supplement it with more specialized ones on the particular subtopics that interest them.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book, although I agree with earlier reviewers that it could use more and better illustrations and also tends to favor particular ecological hypotheses to the near exclusion of others. The book begins with what is certainly the most dramatic description of the KT asteroid impact that I have read so far, and then takes us on a wild ride through the next 65 million years and across the entire North American continent. The book is well-written (downright gripping in places) and I appreciate the exhaustive-but-unobtrusive footnoting. Anyone keen on digging into pre-Columbian ecological history will appreciate Flannery's assemblage of material that would otherwise be scattered across the technical literature. As we approach the Recent Flannery's focus (almost bordering on hero worship) on Paul Martin and the "Pleistocene Blitzkrieg" will doubtless annoy many -even though I tend to agree with Martin & Flannery about the importance of hunting on mammalian ecology I wish that more space had been given to competing hypotheses. Flannery's analysis of the Really Recent (last few hundred years) is definitely abbreviated (I encourage the reader to look to Diana Muir's excellent REFLECTIONS ON BULLOUGH'S POND for more detail) but it is hardly shallow. Instead Flannery asks us to both consider & seriously speculate on how the events of so short a time as we usually regard "history" might produce a future North America. Controversial? you bet! Thought-provoking? Absolutely! Give us some more maps & diagrams & this will jump to 5 stars easily!

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