ENST 12: The Resilient(?) Earth

Assignment #1
Due in class on Thursday February 19

Be sure that you have read all of the assigned readings before starting this assignment.

We can confidently posit two things about the modern environment: 1) climate is getting warmer; and 2) species are going extinct at rates well above what has been the case in the past. But, are these changes “bad”? Could it be said that the organisms that survived the K-T mass extinction were as “weedy” as those species that appear to be doing fine in our own time? If so, does this change your thinking about “weeds”?

In an essay that is not to exceed 3 pages, consider these questions in the context of what you have read by Quammen, Meyer, and Raup. In writing your essay, make sure that it has an explicit thesis about the role of weeds following an extinction. Use ideas in the readings to support that thesis. If your thesis is explicitly contradicted by ideas presented in the readings, be sure to explicitly address this. Be careful to reference ideas from the readings in your essay. This means putting those ideas into your own words rather than quoting directly from the readings.

Good examples of how ideas are cited in scholarly works are in all of our recent readings.

David Quammen is a journalist. As such, his expertise is highly dependent on the expertise of his sources. He is careful to cite them in his prose. For example, in the last paragraph of p. 61, Quammen summarizes Terborgh and Schaik’s ideas about landscape conversion. By adding a citation to Terborgh and Schaik, he is not just making it clear that the ideas about landscape conversion are not his own, he is also using their status as highly respected ecologists to bolster his ideas about our weedy planet.

Stephen Meyer was a political scientist. He used a different style of attribution. In The End of the Wild, he has no explicit citations in the text but rather has notes at the end of the essay. On page 19, he discusses the causes of environmental collapse and in his endnote for page 19 provides a citation to paper in the prestigious journal Proceedings of the National Academy of Science.

David Raup is a Paleontologist and an expert in his own right, but even Raup is careful to cite his sources of information. On page 83, he summarizes the idea of a “kill curve” which is his own creation. Even with this, he includes a citation to his 1991 paper on the kill curve. This citation makes it clear that the idea was sufficiently well respected to appear in the research journal Paleobiology.