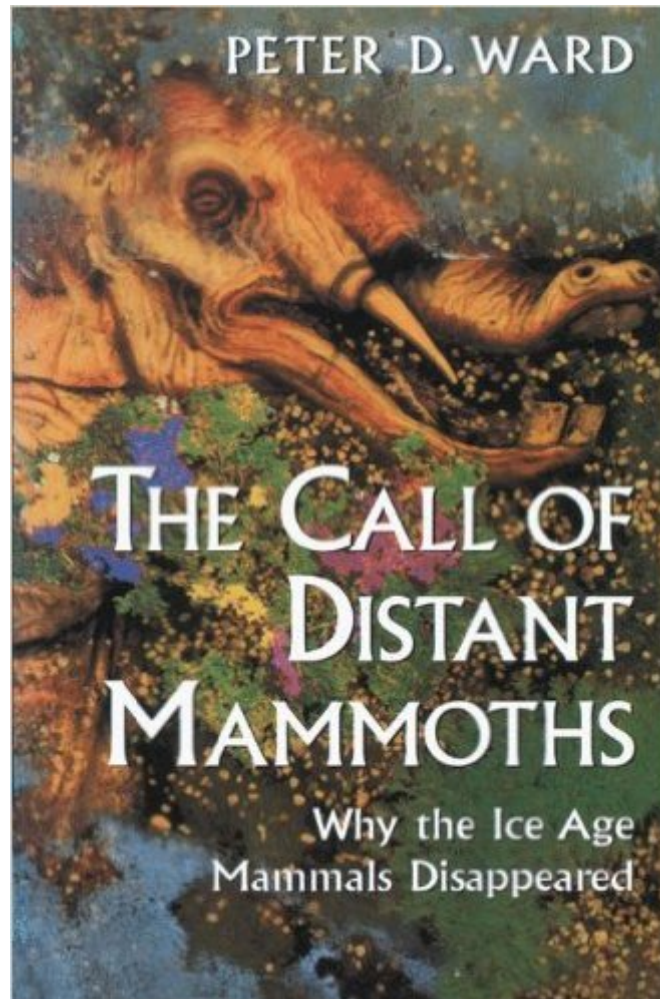


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The Call Of Distant Mammoths: Why The Ice Age Mammals Disappeared



Synopsis

To help us understand what happened during the Ice Age, Peter Ward takes us on a tour of other mass extinctions through earth's history. He presents a compelling account of the great comet crash that killed off the dinosaurs, and describes other extinctions that were even more extensive. In so doing, he introduces us to a profound paradigm shift now taking place in paleontology: rather than arising from the gradual workings of everyday forces, all mass extinctions are due to unique, catastrophic events. Written with an irresistible combination of passion and expertise, *The Call of Distant Mammoths* is an engaging exploration of the history of life and the importance of humanity as an evolutionary force. "Carefully argued...an intelligent and compelling book."-THE OLYMPIAN, SEATTLE, WASHINGTON "Ward deftly summarizes a large body of scientific literature, simplifying complex ideas for the general reader without condescension."-PUBLISHERS WEEKLY "Did the overkill really happen?...Peter Ward deftly summarizes the arguments...Ward tells (the story) well."-THE NEW SCIENTIST

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Peter Ward writes his book, *The Call of Distant Mammoths*, like a murder mystery (a metaphor he uses several times). The victims are the large mammals that disappeared after the last ice age. The perpetrator? Who knows? Peter Ward's thesis fingers early hunters who came across the Asian land bridge as a major, perhaps the major, cause of extinction. Like any good mystery book, Ward starts before the beginning by taking the reader on an imaginary trip in a time machine through past

eras, periods and epochs as he revisits the major extinction events in earth's history and reviews their causes. The most recent, and perhaps best-known, extinction event is that at the K/T boundary that saw the extinction of the dinosaurs. In all his examples, Ward makes the point that extinctions are rapid (at least on geologic time scales) events. I tend to agree, though I'd probably define rapid in terms of the speed with which organisms evolve. Ward gives some good background information regarding general points related to evolution. I especially enjoyed his clear but brief summary of human evolution, as well as the evolutionary history of elephants. With this introduction (which takes up about 1/3 of the book) Ward begins to make his case by examining the period of time around the last ice age. Ward finds more than coincidence in the emergence of human society and extinction of the large mammals at the end of the last ice age. As he puts it: "The time of the Ice Age is of utmost importance to humanity, for it is the time of our origin. We began this interval as australopithecines, ape-like forms living and dying among the other wildlife of Africa. We ended the ice Age, only 10,000 years ago, as humans, living on every continent except Antarctica.

The extinction of ice age mammals and other megafauna is not just a peripheral topic. It is important because, as Mr Ward duly points out, in a sense WE are Ice age megafauna. The mammoths and mastodons and their extinctions are particularly interesting, not just from their romantic appeal, but because they are indeed representative of much that we can learn about what happened to other megafauna at the same time, and indeed about ourselves. A selection of both the proboscideans (elephant line) and hominids wandered out of Africa during the last few million years. Both hominids and the various proboscideans are large and adaptable to varying environmental conditions, including ice ages. Both seem wanderers by nature. Both are intelligent and social animals. Both have few natural predators. Both were very successful during climatic change, including the Ice Ages. Emphasis on WERE. What happened to the mammoths, and other megafauna? This book seeks to answer such a question- the causes, and moreover, the lessons we can learn from this about our own selves. Their extinction is not simple. Overhunting by humans is considered the most likely and significant cause, although there may well have been other contributing factors. Mr Ward contends that the end of the last ice age(s) created stress for mammoths and some other megafaunal species, which humans were then able to push over the edge through overhunting. It is true to say that without humans, they never would have gone extinct, as they survived many other climatic changes. However, the stress that was created by these climatic changes reduced their natural 'immunity' to such predators as humans in the first place, making it easier for humans to drive them to extinction. Basically, we kick other species when they

are down.

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