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Charles Office and Jake Page. TALES OF THE EARTH : PAROXYSMS AND PERTURBATIONS OF THE BLUE PLANET. New York: Oxford University Press, 1993. 226 pp. US\$24.00 hardback ISBN 0-19-507785-7. Acid-free paper.

TALES OF THE EARTH is an extremely ambitious work dealing with the largest and most profound of all possible questions: given the combined forces of natural disaster, plus our capacity for altering the global environment, how long can humanity survive on this planet? The authors, an earth scientist at Dartmouth and a writer for such popular magazines as SMITHSONIAN and NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC, summarize a wide variety of natural threats to continuing human existence: volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, floods, the impact of extraterrestrial objects, cataclysmic climatic change, plagues, and extinctions. Among the dangers caused by humans are pollution (air, sea, and land), smog, ozone depletion, radioactive and other toxic wastes, oceanic contamination, acid rain, carbon dioxide, and the greenhouse effect.

Eyewitness accounts of disasters, both ancient and modern, enliven what is fundamentally a presentation of popular science flavored with a vital social message. Aimed at the informed layperson, the work includes excellent charts, tables, and other illustrations that explain the causes (supposed in some cases) of past or pending disasters. Although there are no footnotes or specific citations to the quotations, an ample bibliography refers the interested reader to major research works in each area. On the whole, the work is wonderfully informative and succeeds admirably in presenting its subject material.

The work does not require a background in science or mathematics and is suitable for anyone with a command of high school English. Yet the writing is marred by a few mistakes and far more spelling errors than one would expect from Oxford. There is "recordeed" for recorded (33), "equiatable" for equitable (63), "preserved" for persevered (143), and the true howler: "I bowed my fact" rather than "I bowed my face" (72).

There are several troubling omissions and at least one major error of fact. The chapter on volcanoes does not mention the recent and much studied Pinatubo eruption; it receives a single sentence much later in the book. The authors assertion that Halley's comet was "certainly documented in 88 B.C." is an interesting but undocumented claim whose source would likely be of great interest to any reader. The famous Tunguska extraterrestrial impact of 1908 is mislocated as "about 400 miles north of Vladivostock" (92). In fact, the Tunguska region is some 1500 miles northwest of Vladivostock, near the Yenisei River.

Despite these flaws, TALES OF THE EARTH raises many critical questions and challenges conventional wisdom about controversial topics. These include whether the greenhouse effect might be offset by counterforces, whether the Alvarez hypothesis on dinosaur extinction is valid, and whether it will ever be possible to cope with nuclear waste.

The last chapter contains the book's most significant conclusion, that the world is rapidly going through a large-scale geophysical experiment, the consequences of which may not be known in time for effective countermeasures. With a distressingly accurate picture of what our future might look like, this sobering work ends with a moving statement as to the kinds of international efforts that must be mounted by developed and developing nations to assure their citizens' survival.

Recommended for advanced high school students, undergraduates, business leaders, politicians, and Congressional representatives.