

# Going Natural

In many ways, we already have. We succumb to the lure of unspoiled wilderness, organic vegetables, flower-filled gardens, soft cotton clothes. But we want more. When we can't experience nature, we'll often settle for buying it: Americans spent, for example, more than \$10 billion on preservative-free foods last year. Yet in a recent Roper Starch survey, only slightly more than half the public (54 percent) had a clear idea of what "natural" means.

It could be, as you'll see in the pages of this special section, that going natural is as inherently elusive as it is appealing: homeopathic medicines that (somehow) heal, plants, mud—even nudity. Making people feel better. Less stressed. More relaxed. More sensual. At least for a while. If not exactly in nature, well, then, in tune with it.



# “A Very Peculiar Species”

GOING NATURAL

A world-famous naturalist finds **humans** are biologically designed for sex, formed by war, primed for planning and susceptible to religion.

What is *natural*? Is it natural to live indoors? To use computers? To wear clothes? To have sex outside of marriage? The word itself reveals the complexity of the thought. Derived from the Latin term for birth, it refers not only to what's out there in nature, but also to what's in here in our natures. Myriad are the connections between who we are and where, in the deepest sense, we're from.

There is more to this than most scientists can track, yet Harvard University's Edward O. Wilson, Ph.D., has spent much of his career pondering nature's many meanings. He is, after all, a naturalist—as well as a prolific author with two Pulitzer Prizes to his name. Originally a myrmecologist (or student of ants), Dr. Wilson is probably best known for his revolutionary 1975 book, *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, which updates Darwin to argue that genes account for the social behavior of all species, from the lowliest amoeba up to *Homo sapiens*. More recently, he has focused on such environmental issues as the towering need to preserve the planet's biodiversity. Not long ago, I made a kind of pilgrimage to Wilson to try to address some of these complex questions about precisely what is natural.

In *Sociobiology*, Wilson rather archly describes human beings as “ecologically a very peculiar species” for our wide geographical range and dense populations. We are distinctive as well for our “erect posture and wholly bipedal locomotion,” for our plethora of sweat glands, and for our large brain. “No organ in the history of life has grown faster,” he

says. Our brainpower, however, is not an unalloyed blessing. It is a by-product of our warring nature, which may have provided both the incentive and the genetic mechanism by which humans molded themselves into the ever-larger social units that have come to dominate the globe. He points out that warfare puts a high premium on communication, organization, planning and group cohesion—and imposes severe penalties on groups that lack these traits. It may be that early man was even more warlike than is generally supposed, he says, for recent studies of preliterate peoples in New Guinea show remarkably frequent battles among warring bands and tribes. “That's the dark side of our evolution,” he says. “Warfare has been critical to our success.”

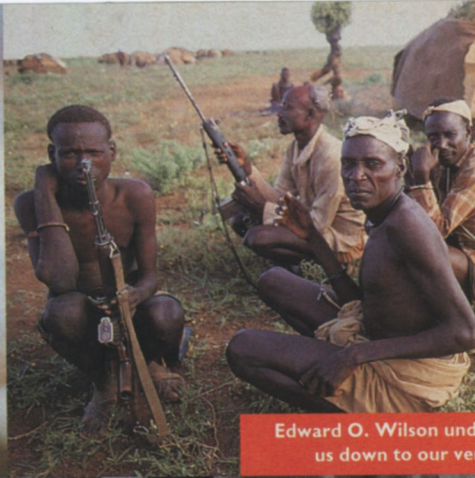
**Of all human characteristics, Wilson believes that our inherent tribalism is possibly the most predominant; it is the fundamental organizing principle in our lives.** “People have an extraordinary ability to find ways to divide themselves up—by race, by class, by football team,” he says. “People have to have something. Even anarchists rally under the black flag. It's absolutely amazing, these endless dichotomous distinctions between in-group and out-group. Why else could folks go so crazy over something as ridiculous as the Super Bowl every January?”

Even an apparently altruistic impulse like religion serves, in his mind, primarily to reinforce group bonds. To him, it is no surprise that the nomadic, herding Hebrews would see

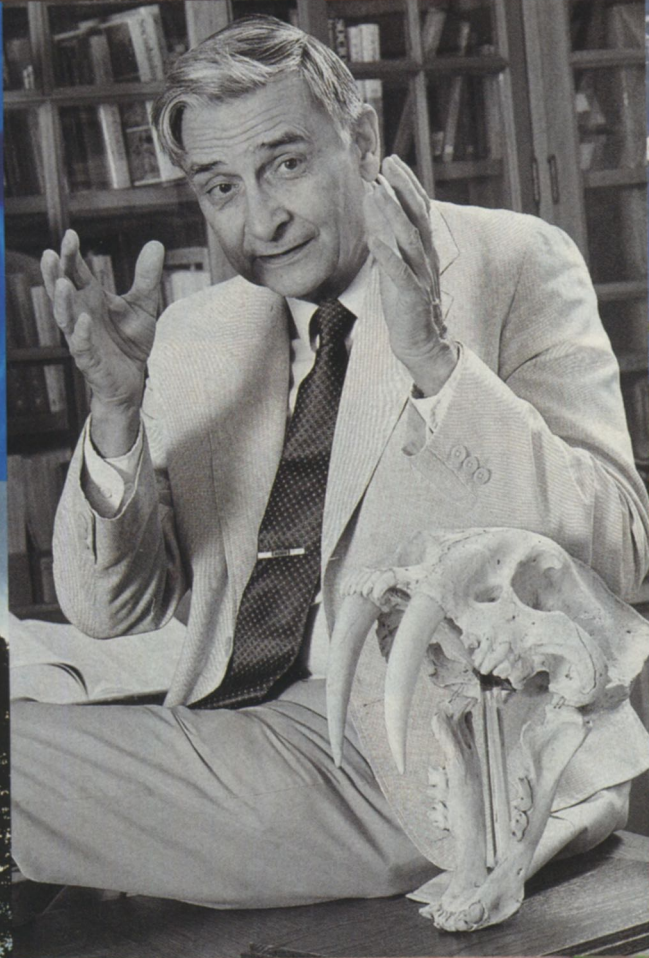
BY JOHN SEDGWICK

PHOTOGRAPHS, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ROBERT WHITMAN; LIZ GILBERT/STYGHIA; DAVID DE LOSSY/IMAGE BANK; COLOR BOX/IFG INTERNATIONAL; E. R. DEGGINGER/EARTH SCENES; SHINICHI EGUCHI/PHOTONICA; ANDREW DUNN; COLOR BOX/IFG INTERNATIONAL; M. NISSEN (ZEFA)/STOCKMARKET; YUKIMASA HIROTA/PHOTONICA; CENTER: LEN IRISH

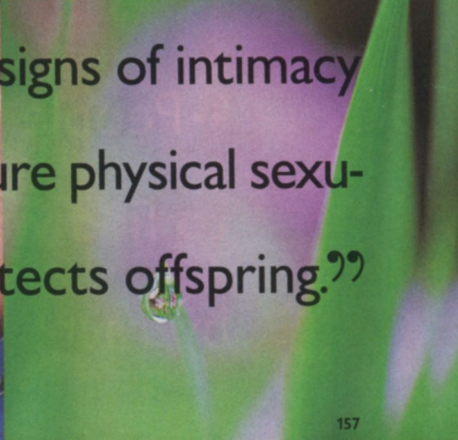
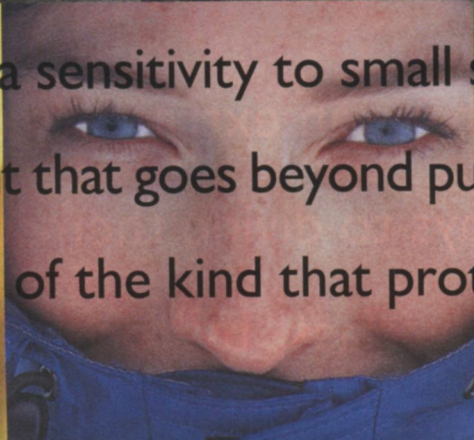
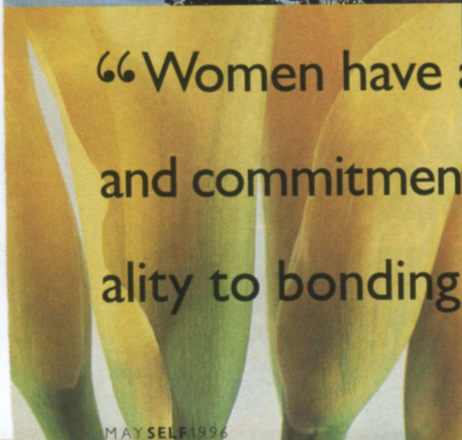




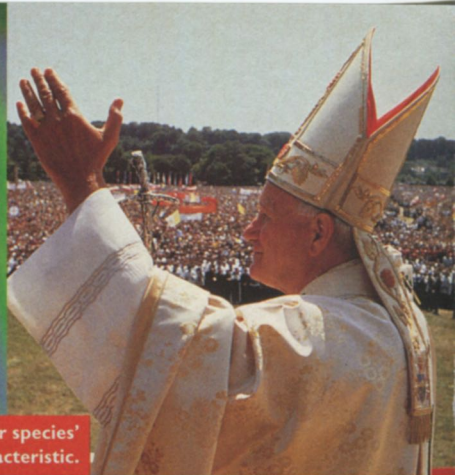
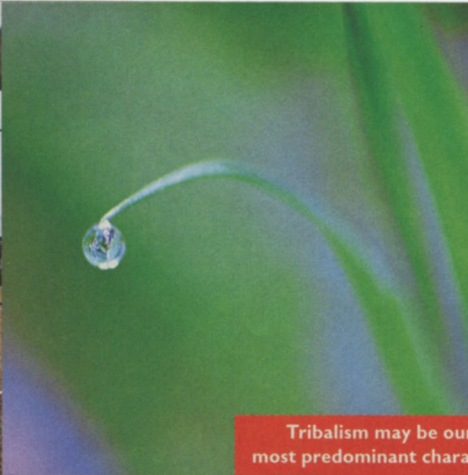
Edward O. Wilson understands us down to our very genes.



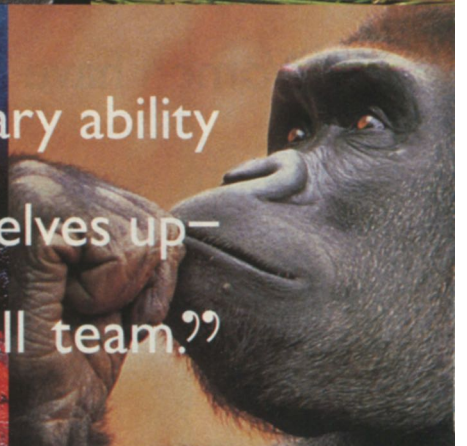
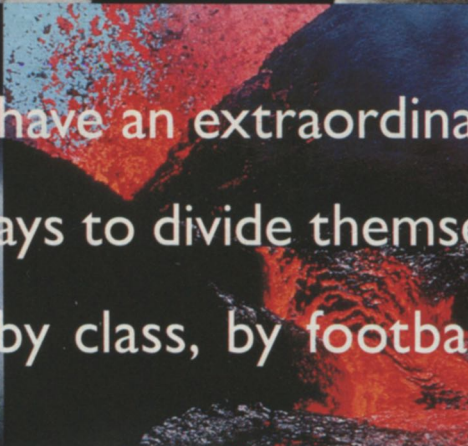
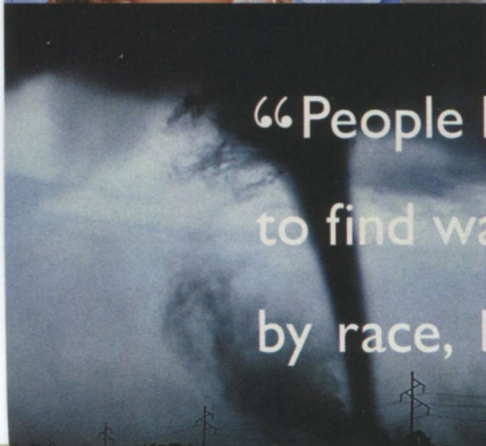
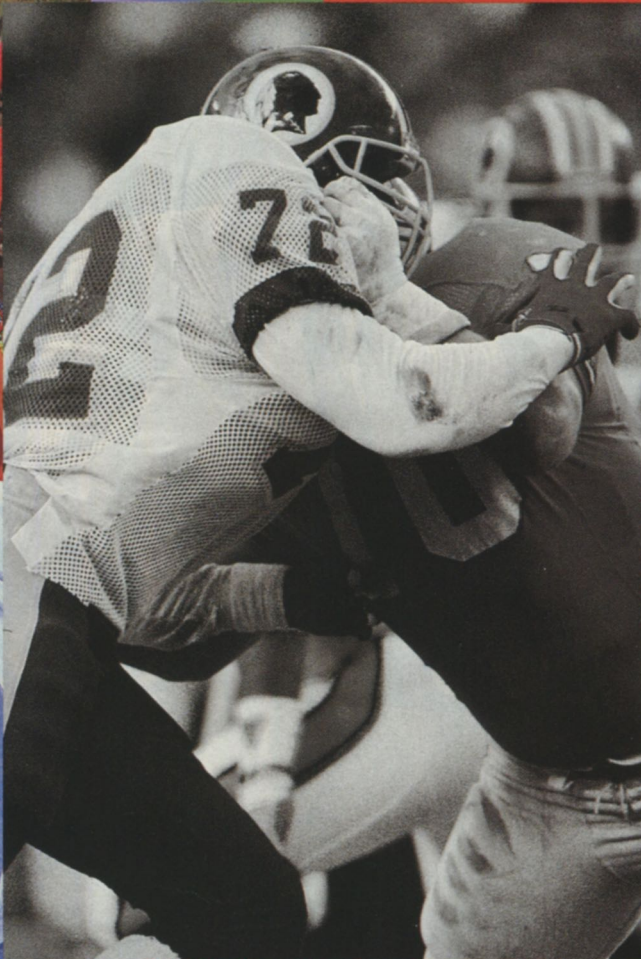
“Women have a sensitivity to small signs of intimacy and commitment that goes beyond pure physical sexuality to bonding of the kind that protects offspring.”







Tribalism may be our species' most predominant characteristic.



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their Lord as a shepherd. He has often noted, too, that many religions make a point of debunking other religions and of promising that theirs is the only true way to get to heaven. The religious impulse is so universal, Wilson says, that he wouldn't be surprised to find that there is a strip of DNA that codes for religious susceptibility.

**Wilson takes issue with religious fundamentalists who confuse their beliefs with the truth.** He is, for example, highly skeptical of the sort of religious thought that implies that sex for purposes other than procreation is "unnatural." Nothing could be more wrong. Humans, says Wilson, are designed for sex. Women's bodies advertise their sexual natures, with breasts that remain protuberant even when they are not producing milk and with prominent and sensitive nipples. Virtually alone in the animal kingdom, humans can mate throughout all seasons of the year. From an evolutionary perspective, the overriding purpose of sex is not to breed but rather to strengthen the emotional bonds between the man and woman at the center of the family unit.

Given that sex is, as Wilson says, so "interesting," he is struck more by the sexual repression in American culture than by its supposed permissiveness. "The sexual liberation of the Sixties was confined to a much-publicized but very small section of society," he says. He is not at all surprised by recent sex surveys showing remarkably little extramarital—or even premarital—sex among Americans. For the most part, modern-day America resembles the prudish facade of Victorian England, notes Wilson.

**So how to account for the current hyper-barrage of sexual imagery?** Because our sexual natures are not allowed to express themselves for cultural reasons, Wilson replies, we get off on visual stimulation. "We have become a peep-show nation. We seem to get immense gratification out of voyeurism and pornography."

Of course, it is males who are more inclined in this direction than females—an "evolutionary mating strategy," explains Wilson, whereby men can sow their seeds widely, but women have to conserve their eggs. "Women exhibit greater choosiness," he says. "They have a sensitivity to small signs of intimacy and commitment that goes beyond pure physical sexuality to bonding of the kind that protects offspring."

While sex may have a narrow purpose, it has had a global result—a population that is increasing so fast that the sheer bulk of humanity has become, in Wilson's term, a "geophysical force" like hurricanes and volcanoes, a force capable of remodeling the global landscape. Just about 50 years ago, the world population was around 2 billion; it is now approaching 6 billion and is expected to reach 10 billion in another 50 years. That is a staggering mass of people. While there has been a lot of happy talk lately about an environmental comeback—and it appears to be true that pollution levels are down and some forests are up—species and ecosystems continue to be annihilated worldwide at an appalling rate.

**Wilson believes the scale of the devastation is on a par with the global cataclysm at the end of the Mesozoic Era 65 million years ago that culminated in the extinction of the dinosaurs.** "People always say, 'Well, isn't that natural?'" he tells me. "No, it's not natural. We're in charge of this one. We're causing it, and we can decide whether it will go on. By

my estimate, the extinction rates have already reached between 100 and 1,000 times the natural extinction rates of new species. You can't make withdrawals from your bank account 1,000 times faster than you make deposits without going broke—soon. Believe me, when our descendants find out that they will have to wait 10 million years to see replaced by natural means what we have carelessly wiped out in a generation or two, they are going to be peeved."

Vast depredations are already occurring: The fishing populations of both the Georges Bank (off the coast of Massachusetts) and the Grand Banks (off the coast of Newfoundland) have been almost entirely depleted. Migratory songbirds on the Eastern seaboard are down by half. The worldwide frog population is dwindling. Butterflies are disappearing.

**Will this be our ultimate downfall, to spoil our own nest and produce a planet that can no longer sustain us?** Wilson says no. Man is sufficiently adaptable to survive, but the ecological losses will devastate our souls. He points out that humans' interior lives are shaped by our ancestral past. It is, to him, no surprise that we grow our lawns and shape our vistas to resemble the grassy African plains from which we sprang aeons ago and that we still exhibit a primordial fear of snakes, despite the far greater hazards posed by handguns, say, or electricity. He believes this link to our deep past is inscribed on our DNA, which is why it persists for virtually all people in virtually all places. And he believes that if the connection to the environment that has shaped us is snapped, the psychic damage to humanity will be profound.

So what will bump us off? For all the excitement over *The Hot Zone*, he doubts that a virus would rise up to eradicate its human hosts. He is more concerned about the nuclear threat, especially the possibility that some terrorist group will blow up an entire city, not just a single building as happened last year in Oklahoma City. "The suitcase bomb in Manhattan," he says. "That's what makes you sweat."

**For the most part, he is pleased by humans' performance.** "I may get hung up by my heels for saying this, but considering we are the first species to accomplish this transition to a whole new way of life based on intelligence and planning ability, we've done extremely well." Still, it is unclear whether our nature will allow us to make the next, more fateful transition—to living in harmony with nature itself.

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