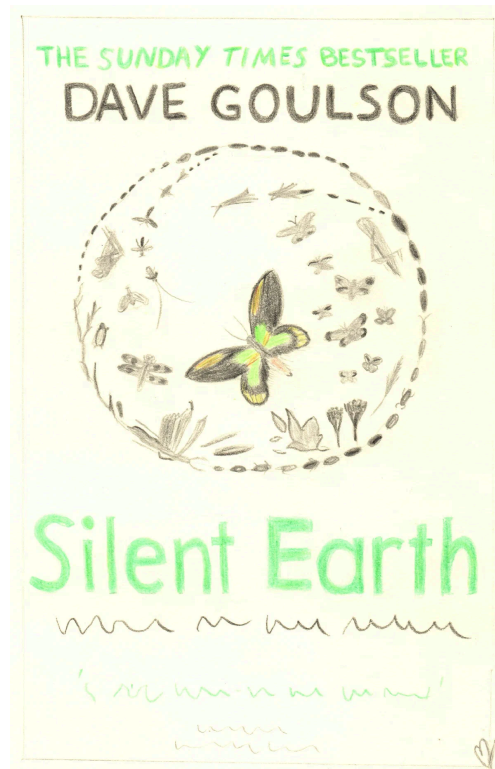


Silent Earth by Dave Goulson

A compelling and urgent read that turns the invisible collapse of insect life into something impossible to ignore.



Averting the insect apocalypse is the subtitle of Dave Goulson’s book *Silent Earth*. Perhaps sounding a bit dramatic to some, *Silent Earth* gives the reader a good picture of the abominable state of insect biodiversity at the time of publishing (2021) and still now¹. Grounded in scientific data, but also using personal experiences and insights, Goulson explains why insects are important, what scientific evidence there is for insect declines and what the root causes are leading to the (continued) loss of insects. The book ends by explaining what citizens, communities, but also local and national governments can do to improve the state of insect life on our planet.

Introducing us to the world of insects, Goulson explains that some other groups of animals have not been as successful. Talking about the success of crustaceans (relatives of insects, such as crabs and the like) in the oceans, he writes about a commonly known land-dwelling species: “The humble woodlouse, an endearing and important creature in its way but with no serious claim to global domination”. Having spent quite

some time with various woodlice species as a young PhD student looking for insects that develop inside and kill woodlice, I can see his point. The journey into the origin and richness of insect life on land is then a trip worth taking for anyone.

Particularly important is the extensive description of the consequences of conventional pest management strategies. Goulson himself has studied the effects of pesticide use on insects throughout his career and clearly sets forth what we know about the disastrous consequences. I hear the same “from the field”: A cooperative organic farmer in my neighborhood once told me that he grew curly kale for university researchers working with insects feeding on it, because all insects died eating curly kale from the supermarket. Goulson explains that some of these pesticides work by systemically affecting the crop plant, meaning that the harmful components to insects are spread throughout the entire plant. It is a no-brainer then that these pesticides not only affect the harmful insects that are targeted, but any other insect or animal that consumes or even comes into contact with the plant, including us humans. What is worse is that these chemicals leach into the ground and water to reach beyond the original area of application. Still worse is that these chemical toxins can mix, leading to pesticide cocktails of which we do not yet even know the effects.

The way that we humans expose ourselves to poison in the form of pesticides is quite remarkable. When we are in search of a new drug to treat a disease, we adhere to extensive rules and regulations to make sure that whoever gets the treatment does not get worse, as it should be. As explained in *Silent Earth*, when the exposure is less direct, such as through our food (and the healthy kind at that), the burden of proof is turned upside down: Pesticides are produced, sold, and applied, and only afterwards the effects on the environment and its living beings are determined. When insects die eating curly kale from the supermarket, surely it cannot have a positive effect on us. We are thus all unwitting participants in an experiment we never consented to. In the case of pesticides, we need not only more data, but also a complete overhaul of how pesticide use is regulated.

One of the most gripping parts of the book is a chapter dedicated to a future outlook on what the world will be if we do not change the way we treat nature. Only reading it yourself can convey the message that Goulson is trying to make. Seeing the current state of the world, Goulson’s outlook may not be as unlikely as you might think. The point is that this future is not, as of yet, set in stone. It should lead any reader to, at least, consider the severity of consequences and hopefully it is a call to action that is heard.

The entire last part of *Silent Earth* revolves around actions that can be taken to help insects thrive again. These range from raising awareness, considering local fauna on your balcony or garden, and reforming our food system with the help of farmers, governments, and beyond, such as enforcing Integrated Pest Management strategies in the European Union. The task at hand is vast, but not insurmountable, and Goulson's list of actions is an excellent guide to fuel positive and effective changes for the environment.

One of Goulson's calls to action is for school children to become more exposed to nature instead of being stuck inside a classroom. My proposition would be that *Silent Earth* becomes mandatory reading, not just for school children, so that everyone can understand what is at stake and why, but more importantly, what we can still do to avert the insect apocalypse (and perhaps see world domination of woodlice).

If anything, with *Silent Earth* Dave Goulson shows us the enormous diversity and importance of insects in the living world. The most important take-away is that we all have the power to take action, however small, to help insects thrive.

Dr. Bertanne Visser, Research Associate of the Fonds National de Recherche Scientifique at the University of Liège, Gembloux, Belgium.

- 1 [Goulson D. 2021. *Silent Earth: Averting the Insect Apocalypse*. Jonathan Cape, London.](#)

HOW TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

Visser B. 2026. Silent Earth by Dave Goulson. Biodiverse No. 3.