



Diversity and the Tropical Rain Forest: A Scientific American Library Book (Scientific American Library Series)

John Terborgh

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The tropical rain forest is the most exuberant manifestation of nature's diversity, and the abundance of life it nurtures has captured the fascination of scientists since the time of Darwin. A single tree in the rain forest may support as many as 150 species of beetle alone, and 300 different kinds of trees may inhabit a single hectare. That same hectare may be home to over 41,000 different species of insects. Why are there so many species? Why do tropical forests in particular contain so many species of trees--or for that matter, of birds, reptiles, or almost anything else? What can we learn by studying this remarkable diversity and what can be done to preserve it? In this sumptuously illustrated volume, veteran scientist and teacher John Terborgh shows how scientists approach these critical questions. At the heart of the study of biodiversity is the investigation of the ecological processes that accommodate diversity and the evolutionary processes that generate it. Separate in principle, these two sets of factors are intricately interwoven, and it is this complex interrelationship that *Diversity and the Tropical Rain Forest* seeks to unravel. The book begins with an overview of the results of evolution as expressed in large-scale phenomena--the patterning of tropical vegetation on climatic gradients, the adaptation of plants to a wide range of soil conditions, and the contrasting degrees of diversity found in temperate versus tropical forests. The ensuing chapters on ecology examine the rain forest on a smaller scale, presenting the most recent theories of how the dynamic relationships between plants and animals, under the influence of the tropical climate, have maintained such a profusion of forms of life. The focus then returns to evolution, as Terborgh examines the mechanisms that generate diversity, the checks and balances that govern the extinction of species, and the similar evolutionary adaptations of organisms living continents apart. In concluding, Dr

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