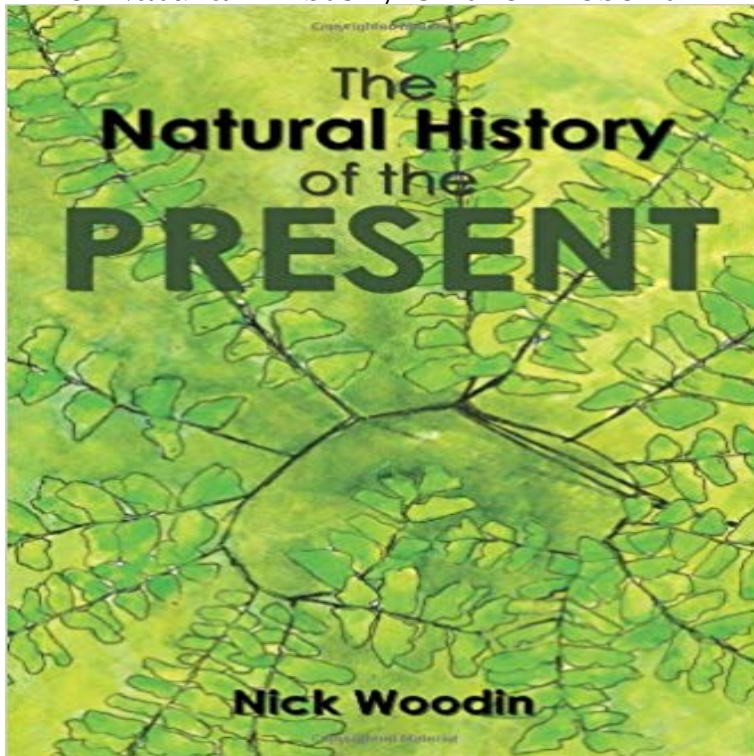


The Natural History of the Present



In *The Natural History of the Present* I describe the influence of different sorts of material lives—hunter-gatherers, horticulturalists, agriculturalists, early industrialists, moderns—on the natural environment; how that came to be; the advantages and disadvantages of the commodification of nature, which began not with us but with the first agriculturalists who turned trees into logs and forests into fields. I describe the natural world and how we could live modern lives in it. Two hundred years ago the use of fossil fuels to smelt iron and power steam engines removed the limits of the agricultural world (kept in check by the growth of trees, the growth of food plants, the fertility of soils). In the 20th century petroleum (and the petrochemical industry), penicillin, and electricity removed, at least temporarily, most limits from the human habitat. Our influence on the natural world is now enormous, subtle and ineluctable—dams influence coastal estuaries, for instance; carbon dioxide from burning fossil fuels warms the air and acidifies the sea; tiny amounts of chemicals that mimic hormones affect wildlife, and us. In *The Natural History of the Present* I try to outline where we stand with respect to the natural world and how we got there. Ingenuity and economics have created the modern world. Can they give us a new one? Do we want one?

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