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"The Alexandrian Library of Life: A Flawed Metaphor for Biodiversity"

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In the last quarter-century many scientific, environmental, and popular publications have used a metaphor comparing species extinction and the loss of biodiversity in the modern era to the destruction of the ancient Library of Alexandria in Egypt more than 1,500 years ago. The rhetorical figure is characteristic of the environmental humanities, for it invokes the value of cultural and literary treasures to reinforce the importance of biological diversity. This article traces the origins of the metaphor to related figures of The Book of Life and to the figure of genetic information as a textual code. The Alexandrian Library of Life caught hold in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when concern about biodiversity and the destruction of tropical rainforests coincided with developments in gene sequencing, the Human Genome Project, and the growth of Internet communications and electronic library collections. Scientists and environmentalists at that time sensed both the promise of unprecedented access to bio-information and the threat of lost knowledge through species extinction. The popularity of the metaphor conceals several weaknesses, however. Living species, even using the methods of gene sequencing, cannot be archived or copied like texts, and the impulse to do so reflects imperialist efforts to appropriate and control knowledge, as several empires attempted to do at Alexandria during the library's long history. The metaphor of a species as a book, represented in the library by one specimen or copy, obscures the fact that the Alexandrian library consisted of manuscripts, not print books. In essence, species may be more like manuscripts than books after all. (Text from author's abstract)

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