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#### The Ghosts of Evolution

Connie Barlow  
\$26 Basic Books

AFTER the destruction of paradise, only the plants survived. But this paradise isn't the familiar Garden of Eden; it's the Americas during the last ice age.



The story does begin with fruit, though--the large native fruits of tropical Central America, such as avocado, mango, papaya and watermelon. These fruit trees all cater to fruit-loving animals, and in return for eating the fruit, the animals disperse their seed. But there's a mystery: nowadays large plant eaters such as the tapir and capybara enjoy the fruit without dispersing the seeds. So two American ecologists, Daniel Janzen and Paul Martin, began to wonder where the animal "partners" of these fruit trees were. The animals that coevolved with the avocado are lost in the mists of time, so which animals kept them going?

Ghosts of Evolution tells a wonderful tale of ecological investigation of how the ice-age mammoths, mastodons, horses and ground sloths of America--68 per cent of its genetic richness--became extinct while 98 or more of 112 tropical fruits still thrive.

The answer to the seed conundrum? It's all thanks to cultivation by humans. We've become the companion animal to a host of plants. A thought to recall when you tuck into your next mango or papaya.

Douglas Palmer is one of the authors of The Science Book to be published by Cassell this September

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