

The Struggle for Existence

The life of wild animals is a struggle for existence. The full exertion of all their faculties and all their energies is required to preserve their own existence and provide for that of their infant offspring. The possibility of procuring food during the least favorable seasons and of escaping the attacks of their most dangerous enemies are the primary conditions which determine the existence both of individuals and of entire species.

The numbers that die annually must be immense; and as the individual existence of each animal depends upon itself, those that die must be the weakest—the very young, the aged, and the diseased—while those that prolong their existence can only be the most perfect in health and vigor, those who are best able to obtain food regularly and avoid their numerous enemies. It is "a struggle for existence," in which the weakest and least perfectly organized must always succumb.

Useful Variations Will Tend to Increase, Unuseful or Hurtful Variations to Diminish

Most or perhaps all the variations from the typical form of a species must have some definite effect, however slight, on the habits or capacities of the individuals. Even a change of color might, by rendering them more or less distinguishable, affect their safety; a greater or less development of hair might modify their habits. More important changes, such as an increase in the power or dimensions of the limbs or any of the external organs, would more or less affect their mode of procuring food or the range of country which they could inhabit. It is also evident that most changes would affect, either favorable or adversely, the powers of prolonging existence. An antelope with shorter or weaker legs must necessarily suffer more from the attacks of the feline carnivora; the passenger pigeon with less powerful wings would sooner or later be affected in its powers of procuring a regular supply of food; and in both cases the result must necessarily be a diminution of the population of the modified species.

If, on the other hand, any species should produce a variety having slightly increased powers of preserving existence, that variety must inevitably in time acquire a superiority in numbers.

Lamarck's Hypothesis Very Different from that Now Advanced

The hypothesis of Lamarck—that progressive changes in species have been produced by the attempts of animals to increase the development of their own organs and thus modify their structure and habits—has been repeatedly and easily refuted by all writers on the subject of varieties and species.

The giraffe did not acquire its long neck by desiring to reach the foliage of the more lofty shrubs and constantly stretching its neck for the purpose, but because any varieties which occurred among its ancestors with a longer neck than usual at once secured a fresh range of pasture over the same ground as their shorter-necked companions, and on the first scarcity of food were thereby enabled to outlive them.

Questions:

1. How would you characterize Wallace's idea that "The life of wild animals is a struggle for existence?" How is Wallace's view scientific?
2. Wallace claims that "useful variations will tend to increase, unuseful or hurtful variations to diminish." How does this occur? What evidence does he cite?
3. How does Wallace's explanation differ from Lamarck's?
4. What do you think of Wallace's critique of Lamarck's hypotheses?