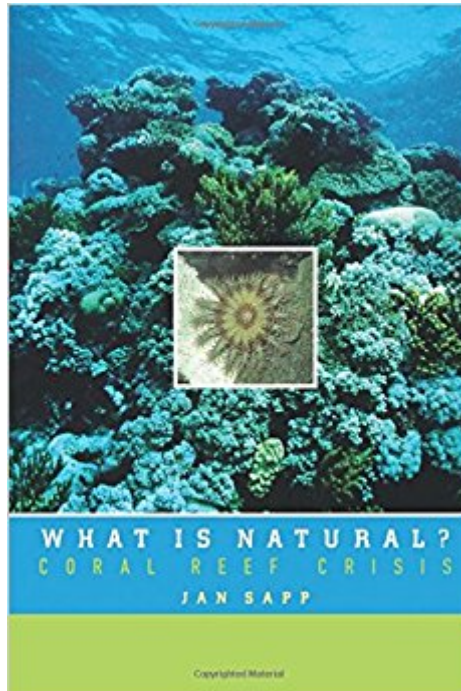




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# What Is Natural?: Coral Reef Crisis



## Synopsis

During the late 1960s and 1970s, massive herds of poisonous crown-of-thorns starfish suddenly began to infest coral reef communities around the world, leaving in their wake devastation comparable to a burnt-out rainforest. In *What is Natural?*, Jan Sapp both examines this ecological catastrophe and captures the intense debate among scientists about what caused the crisis, and how it should be handled. The crown-of-thorns story takes readers on tropical expeditions around the world, and into both marine laboratories and government committees, where scientists rigorously search for answers to the many profound questions surrounding this event. Were these fierce starfish outbreaks the kind of manmade disaster heralded by such environmentalists as Rachel Carson in *Silent Spring*? Indeed, discussions of the cause of the starfish plagues have involved virtually every environmental issue of our time--over-fishing, pesticide use, atomic testing, rain forest depletion, and over-population--but many marine biologists maintain that the epidemic is a natural feature of coral-reef life, and ecological "balance of nature" that should not be tampered with until we know the scientific truth of the crisis. But should we search for the scientific truth before taking action? And what if an environmental emergency cannot wait for a rigorous scientific search for "the truth"? The starfish plagues are arguably one of most mysterious ecological phenomena of this century. Through the window of this singular event, *What is Natural* lucidly illustrates the complexity of environmental issues while probing the most fundamental questions about the relationship between man and nature.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Students of marine biology have long been fascinated by the superorganisms called coral reefs, formed over thousands of years from skeletal remains and other matter. Many of those students have warned for several decades that these uncommon reefs are endangered by human development. Now, historian of science Jan Sapp writes, they are faced with another, paradoxical threat: the accelerating destruction of reefs by a creature called *Acanthaster planci*, the crown-of-thorns starfish. These starfish were a rarity when they were first observed off the coast of Australia in the late 1950s. Since that time their population has blossomed, with some scientists debating the cause but linking it at one time or another to familiar troublemakers, including global warming, overfishing, pesticide use, and atomic testing. Still other reputable scientists, Sapp writes, have dismissed the crown-of-thorns controversy as a hoax, claiming that most coral reefs are in no danger. "Facts, theories, values, and politics were so entangled in the controversy that it was often as difficult for us to separate them as it was for scientists to separate anthropogenic from natural change," he notes. Among the points in the debate that he finds most interesting is this: What happens when a natural predator threatens an already endangered species or habitat? The answers that he suggests are far from definitive, but they open up a discussion that will become increasingly important as more and more ecosystems require protection. --Gregory McNamee --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

Why has a once-obscure starfish destroyed swaths of coral reefs all over the Pacific? What should we do about it? Sapp, a professor of the history of science at York University in Canada, offers few answers in this digressive, poorly focused study. The spiny, poisonous crown-of-thorns starfish mystified biologists by turning up in great numbers on Australia's Green Island Reef in the early 1960s, injuring tourists and eating the coral. By 1970, crown-of-thorns infestations were laying waste to reefs from Australia to Guam. Sapp follows the intense scientific debates over whether human activity caused the starfish booms, and whether and how to save the coral. Sometimes he explains the reefs' travails in detail; other times he treats the crown-of-thorns outbreaks as case studies in ecological policy, comparing them to later, larger debates about, for example, El Niño. Sapp has collected plenty of scientific articles, government reports and conference proceedings from each stage of the starfish debate. But he fails to tie his sources together. Instead, he jumps from one broad topic to another: should scientists interfere with natural processes they don't fully understand? How do the media and public react to environmental crises? How have these reactions changed since the 1960s? How should coral-reef experts "behave in the midst of global

environmental uncertainties?" What can those starfish outbreaks teach us about other, newer threats to coral reefs? It's hard to tell, in this sometimes technical, jumbled and very academic book, which problem Sapp wants most to solve, or whether he even offers any solutions. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc. --This text refers to the Hardcover edition.

The book is good so far, I needed it for class and its a nice read. It teaches a lot in a relaxed way

Wow! Great read. Ultimately, the topics Sapp goes after are deep and not easily answered. Nor should they be. (Yeah! Publishers Weekly Review!) Surely the book is about Crown-of-thorns-Starfish and their impact on the coral reef. Yet science doesn't happen in vacuum, and this book is as much about how scientists interact with society-at-large, as it is about starfish. At time when less that half of americans "believe in evolution" and much much more sadly even fewer understand what evolution even is, books like this can help explain how the conversations between scientists and the public should probably go.

As a wedge in the reflection of our coral reef management policy, crown-of-thorns starfish outbreaks attracted people's attention on our deteriorating reef environments. With the concern of biodiversity conservation, Jan Sapp included and organized documents of scientific studies and political events to examine the proposed reasons of starfish plagues and its influence on global reef management. For those who are interested in coral reef biology and environmental management, this easy-read book provides good amount of reef ecology knowledge, also reveals a good case to understand how on-land decision makers determine the fate of underwater world.

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