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Forces of Nature: Our Quest to Conquer the Planet

Barry A. Vann

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As long as the human species has existed, men and women have had to contend with the unpredictable forces of nature. Geographer Barry A. Vann brings a unique perspective to this age-old struggle in this illuminating overview of human population shifts and their precarious relationship with climate change and geography.

Vann takes us on a journey along the migration routes of the earliest modern humans and tells why our ancestors chose to settle down in places that can be best described as natural utopias. In the religiously oriented worldview of ancient peoples, such places took on a sacred aura of divine favor. Similarly, destructive events such as volcanic eruptions and earthquakes were interpreted as expressions of divine wrath. Vann shows how the ancient texts of the Bible and the Qur'an offer glimpses of past climates that were distinctly different from the climate of our time.

He also discusses the rise of technology as a means of controlling the threatening features of the natural world. Though technology has enabled humanity to cope with hostile climates, it has also created a false sense of security. Vann notes that population clusters are increasing in dangerous areas and that no technology can protect vulnerable groups from major-category hurricanes, tornadoes, or earthquakes.

Finally, he considers our current anxieties regarding global warming, pointing out that this focus has obscured a good deal of historical and geological evidence for a return of another ice age.

The Forces of Nature offers a challenging perspective on the precarious balance between fragile human communities and their often-threatening environments.

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