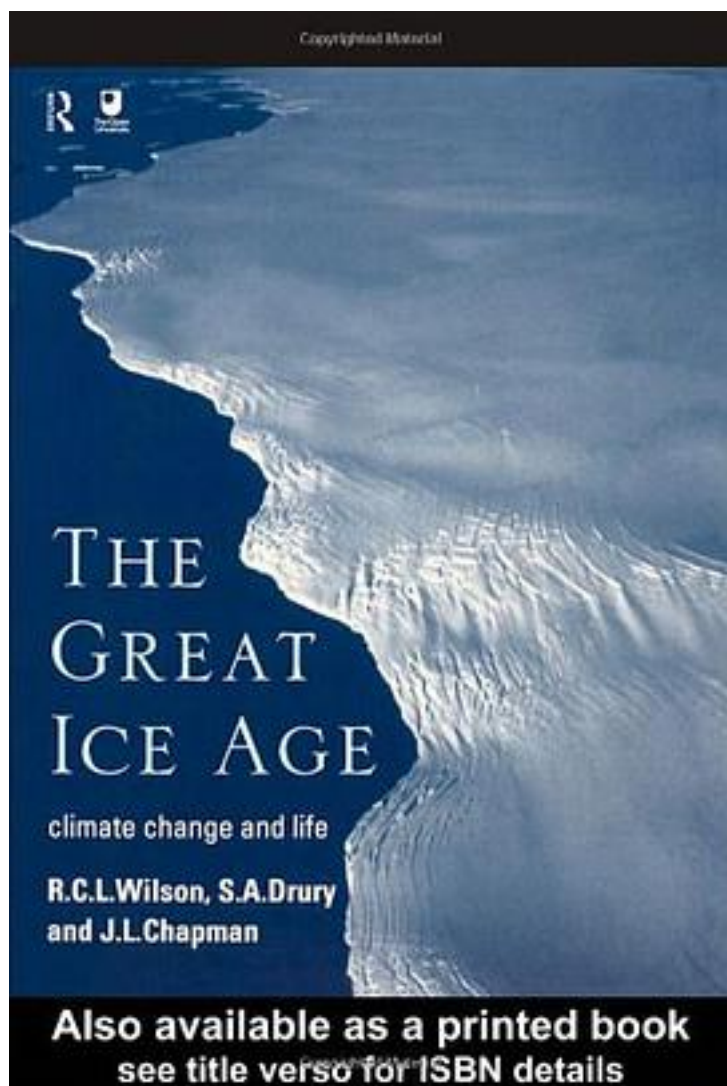


The Great Ice Age



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著者:Wilson, R. C. L. (EDT)/ Drury, S. A./ Chapman, J. L.

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The Great Ice Age is also our age. Not only is it a period when the Earth experienced rapid and regular climatic changes, it is also the time when a life form evolved that is capable of studying and manipulating environmental systems. Part 1 of The Great Ice Age documents and explains the natural climatic changes that have occurred during the past 2.6 million years. Exploring a wide range of records of climate change, the authors demonstrate the interconnectivity of the components of the Earth's climate system and show how the evidence for past climatic change is obtained from oceanic and terrestrial realms. Such changes occurred over a range of time scales from millions of years, through tens of thousands of years, to mere centuries and decades. A number of explanations for past climatic shifts are explored, revealing that, as yet, no all embracing model has emerged that can adequately explain all the evidence reviewed in the book. In Part 2, some of the biological effects of the climatic upheavals described in Part 1 are examined, focusing on palaeoecological changes involving plants and animals, the evolution of human anatomy, and the way in which conscious social behaviour developed as a response to rapidly changing selection pressures. Global climate change increasingly drove human beings towards mastery of their surroundings: the resultant anthropogenically induced environmental change extends back a million years or more, but has increased dramatically during the last ten thousand years since the last retreat of huge ice sheets. The record of past environmental changes discussed in The Great Ice Age is the foundation on which to base our understanding of the global experiment we are conducting as the 'conscious forcing function' in the evolution of the Earth system.

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