The New Student Seminar is a semester-long required course for all new undergraduates enrolled in the Steinhardt School. The seminar is your orientation to the university and our school and will introduce you to the nature of higher education and your program of study. Using the themes raised in the new student reading, you will explore your role as a new member of our diverse, global, and inclusive academic community.

The Book

In the Pulitzer Prize winning book, The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History, journalist Elizabeth Kolbert traces the development, impact, and extinction of various species over the last half-billion years. She warns that we are in the middle of a massive loss of biological biodiversity—the extinction of almost half of all living species on earth within this century. She tells us that humans are driving this mass extinction. “People change the world,” Kolbert writes. We have disturbed our relationship with the earth’s ecosystem and in so doing, we are altering life on our planet.

The Theme

OUR PLACE IN THE WORLD AND WHY IT MATTERS

Kolbert tells a story of how and why humans have altered—and are now altering—life on the planet in a way no species has before. Farming, urbanization, and industrial development are destroying natural habitats for animals and plants, poisoning our atmosphere and oceans, and endangering the long-term health of the planet and our own survival. These changes are happening so quickly that many other species cannot adapt. Kolbert asks us to look back over vast periods of time to more deeply understand the complex and interdependent nature of life and challenges us to look ahead for ways we can find imaginative and innovative solutions to these challenges. Using the new student reading theme, students will explore their place in the world and their role in its delicately balanced ecosystem. They will explore how their chosen field may have the keys to create a more sustainable world.

CONTINUED
THINGS TO CONSIDER

As a new student at NYU, you are part of a global network of students who have been raised in different cultures, among different people with both shared and different values. You come together this year with a common goal: to further your education and enlarge your understanding of the world around us.

This year we ask you to consider your place in the world and to think about why we as individuals and as members of the human race matter to each other and to the fate of the earth, our home.

1. What is our responsibility to our earth? To each other? What does it mean to share a common humanity?

2. What lasts? How? Why? Why do we care? Why do we care so much about the death of the last white rhino, which prompted worldwide coverage, when the extinction of species of tiny frogs in the jungle only gets a yawn?

3. Which of Kolbert’s examples seems most compelling or troubling to you, and why?

4. What are the challenges of living in a world whose inhabitants are interdependent and dependent on a finite supply of resources?

5. How we assign value to living creatures affects the choices and decisions we make. What is the connection between this and the values we assign to people?

6. How far would you go to protect tribes/groups that haven’t been touched by modernity? What is our responsibility to preserve and to not stand by to let things happen?

7. How has reading this book changed your views about climate change? About your role in the world? What specific steps might you take to counteract the trends that Kolbert describes in her book? What can you do as an individual?

8. Think of examples from your own disciplines that speak to the issues raised in the book. If you had to write a chapter in this book from your own discipline, what would you title it and why?

9. “The Thing with Feathers” (chapter XIII) alludes to Emily Dickinson’s poem “Hope is the thing with feathers” (Poem 314). After reading Kolbert’s book, where do you see some hopeful possibilities?