

saco



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darkecosystems

CURATORIAL TEXT

Rats and cockroaches are prime examples of species that can withstand extermination. Their superior adaptation to adverse environmental conditions can ensure them a dominant position in the long run. The final battle for survival is not won with brute force but by staying hidden while the rest are wiped out. The history of life on Earth is ultimately a chain of these resistance strategies.

Several billion years before rats and cockroaches, even before the release of oxygen into the atmosphere, life appeared in its most remote form. In the last century, biologists defined the parameters of temperature, salinity, dryness, and acidity limits, outside of which no organism could resist. As a consequence, astronomers narrowed the map of the sky in their search for extraterrestrial life to places that met these conditions. With the narrow field, the chance of finding anything was close to zero. Between the 1950s and the 1980s the desire to find extraterrestrials unleashed a creative wave of transfigured human-like beings in literature and film. Imagination often fills in the gaps when facts fall short.

The Atacama Desert is an extreme place par excellence. So much so that almost two hundred years ago, Charles Darwin affirmed that no life could exist there. This belief was later reinforced by the German naturalist living in Chile, Rodolfo Philippi, who defined the mining destiny of those endless and empty rocky plains. If the restricted parameters of life established half a century ago were true, the process of evolution would have never begun. Several generations of men dedicated to science were misled by their faith in their senses. They thought that what they saw was everything, that the existence of something else, hidden underneath, was simply impossible.

Interest in the 'dark biosphere,' the subsurface microorganisms that defy any theory about life endurance, only emerged about two decades ago. It was there that polyextremophiles, champions of endurance, appeared. Comfortable within the aseptic walls of spacecraft, they are ready to travel to Mars for a speculative encounter with their peers. As a result of the multiple extreme conditions of space, these beings are precisely what we expect to find there. Some can withstand a thousand times greater cosmic x-ray radiation than humans and expose themselves to atmospheric pressure six thousand times greater than that existing on the Earth's surface. Others can consume acid or suspend their metabolic processes even for centuries yet maintain their cellular integrity and ability to grow and reproduce when they reactivate their vital functions.

If we could only be like them. To know how to stop completely, to navigate between the 'liquid boundaries of life and death.' To pause, along with our physiology, desires, anxieties, and fears, awaiting the propitious moment to return. To postpone a mind that is incompatible with its time. To feed on what is most abundant. To not relate. To not breathe.

The history of science has shown us that we look only where we expect to find something. This seems reasonable, but it is limiting because dark ecosystems inhabit inaccessible and inhospitable areas on the planet and inside our minds. After all, the shape of our head resembles the shape of Earth.

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