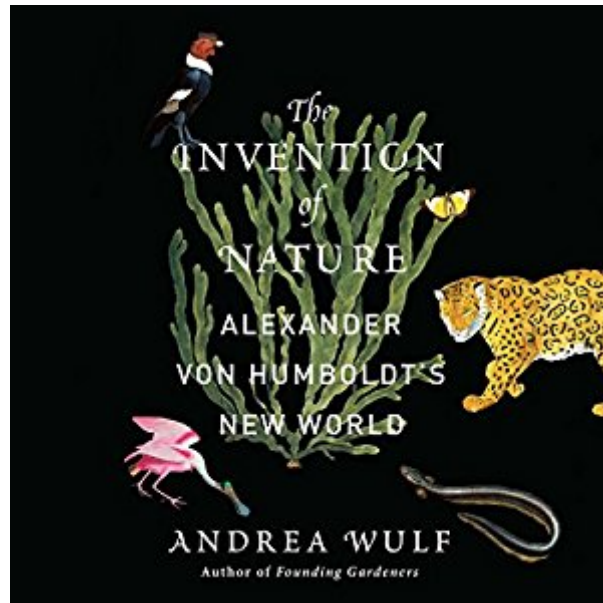


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# The Invention Of Nature: Alexander Von Humboldt's New World



## Synopsis

Alexander von Humboldt (1769-1859) was an intrepid explorer and the most famous scientist of his age. His restless life was packed with adventure and discovery, whether climbing the highest volcanoes in the world or racing through anthrax-infested Siberia. He came up with a radical vision of nature, that it was a complex and interconnected global force and did not exist for man's use alone. Ironically, his ideas have become so accepted and widespread that he has been nearly forgotten. Now Andrea Wulf brings the man and his achievements back into focus: his investigation of wild environments around the world; his discoveries of similarities between climate zones on different continents; his prediction of human-induced climate change; his remarkable ability to fashion poetic narrative out of scientific observation; and his relationships with iconic figures such as Simón Bolívar and Thomas Jefferson. Wulf examines how his writings inspired other naturalists and poets such as Wordsworth, Darwin, and Goethe, and she makes the compelling case that it was Humboldt's influence on John Muir that led him to his ideas of preservation and that shaped Thoreau's *Walden*. Humboldt was the most interdisciplinary of scientists and is the forgotten father of environmentalism. With this brilliantly researched and compellingly written audiobook, she makes clear the myriad, fundamental ways that Humboldt created our understanding of the natural world.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

If you're like me, you had no idea who Alexander von Humboldt was prior to this surprisingly

well-received book. So why read a book about him? Well, you've surely heard of the people he influenced: e.g. Darwin, Thoreau, Jefferson, Bolivar, Wordsworth, Samuel Taylor Coleridge and John Muir to name a few. Humboldt was one of the top scientists of his time, but his influence extended far beyond that aspect of his life. Much of the thrill of this book comes from Humboldt's expeditions to Latin America and Russia. He faced alligators, electric eels, a capsized ship, and natural disasters. He also made Herculean efforts to arrange a Himalayan expedition, but politics and personalities intervened to delay him until he was too old to make the trip. (It should be noted that when Humboldt summited Mount Chimborazo in Ecuador in the early 1800s, it was believed to be the highest peak in the world [at 6268m, or 20,600ft.] Needless to say there was a lot unknown about the Himalaya at the time e.g. Everest is 8848m, or over 29,000ft.) While Humboldt produced specific breakthroughs and discoveries (e.g. inventing isotherms and discovering the magnetic equator), much of the inspiration he provided was in showing the interconnectedness of nature and the potential for unintended consequences. As a Prussian aristocrat, Humboldt was born into a position to have influence but it was his ideas and his personality that made him so sought after. He could be arrogant, but was humbled in the face of nature. He was charismatic, but did not suffer fools kindly. He was adamantly anti-slavery and strongly opposed efforts of religion to stymie science in order to delay the toppling of their sacred cows. The book is arranged into 23 chapters, divided among five parts.

Brilliant. At a time when we crave a new hero, one who braves the densest jungle, climbs the tallest mountains, and embodies the irrepressible desire to study and record everything he sees in the name of scientific advancement, we need look no further than the nearly-but-not-quite-forgotten Alexander von Humboldt. Move over Indiana Jones, here we find a real historical account of someone who took his pursuit of knowledge to a level of adventure that is unmatched. About the title: *The Invention of Nature*. What bombast! Surely, you exclaim, nature was not invented by anyone. The title refers to the role that Humboldt played in establishing the idea that nature is a web of life and the everything is intricately tied together - a theme that Wulf returns to at many points in the book. It could have been titled 'The Invention of Ecology' but because ecology is often popularly associated with saving a particular species here or there. The concept of 'environment' and 'ecology' are central to what Humboldt brought us, but at the time these ideas were so revolutionary, and his uttering of them had such a significant effect, that it was as if people -- all people everywhere -- were finally able to see nature for the first time. It was that big. I first heard his name in reference to Humboldt county, a largish county in northern California. Walking through central park

in New York, I came upon the statue of Humboldt, and figured he must have been some great guy to have monuments on both coasts! I never knew his story until reading this masterpiece from Andrea Wulf. By all means, get a copy and read it! Humboldt was a bright but unmotivated student born into a well connected family near Berlin.

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