

Dolphin

By Alan Rauch. 2014. The University of Chicago Press, 1427 East 60th Street, Chicago, IL, USA, 60637. 207 pages, 16.02 USD, Paper.

As Book Review Editor I receive unsolicited books. If I think the subject is specialised and I know an expert who writes well, I will ask them to review the book. Otherwise I send a notice to the 50 or so reviewers I have on file. About half of these people are regular re-

viewers, working on a book or more per year. Occasionally no one wants to volunteer, so, if I think I have sufficient knowledge, I will review it myself.

It has been my privilege to encounter dolphins on many occasions, most recently the Gangetic Dolphin in

the Koshi river of Nepal and the Pink and Grey River Dolphins in the Amazon. Therefore when this book sat unclaimed for two weeks I decided to review it myself. Before I got to the end of the first page I was entranced.

This little book has only six chapters, covering zoology, species, mythology, behaviour, dangers and as culture icons. In addition to the usual references (including websites) there is a two-page time-line from 1349 to present, showing our human interaction with this mammal.

The zoology chapter covers the fundamental biology of current dolphins. It summarises the evolution of these marine mammals from their deer-like ancestors over about 50 million years. The author follows their change from a four-legged and nose bearing animal to the flippers and blow-hole bearing mammal we know today. He covers the often weird ideas of early naturalists and the fish-mammal confusion. Rauch describes the adaptations that dolphins have made to live underwater – in their shape, vision and the internal body changes.

The chapter on species covers only enough dolphins to establish their diversity. From the whale-sized Orca to the 1.4 m Hector's dolphin and the more oddball river dolphins, the author describes those species that establish the boundaries of dolphin appearance.

Mythology discusses the real or fanciful stories that have arisen about dolphins. These range from dolphins with saw backs that slice open crocodile bellies, to the origin of "le Dauphin" of France and the numerous tales of dolphins rescuing humans. The story of Pelorus Jack, a Risso's Dolphin, has an intriguing twist, taking it from real to myth.

The chapter on Intelligence, Social Behaviour and Echolocation gives us an insight into the dolphin's world. It also tells how little we really know. In partic-

ular the author explains their wonderful ability to use echolocation. He also spends time recounting their "intelligence" although it seems futile to measure a marine mammal's brain power using human, land-based, thinking.

Apart from the natural dangers that dolphins face, we humans add other risks. A very small portion of humans directly kill dolphins for food. More frequently they die enmeshed in fishing nets set for tuna. Even those that get released from these nets are so injured that they die later. Pollution adds to their stresses. As an apex predator their fat contains pesticides, fire retardants and other carcinogens. They have been captured for zoos, research and even the military.

Dolphins have been intertwined with human culture for millennia. Our perspective has ranged from ferocious killers to children's soul mates. We have glorified them as surrogate humans and eaten them as fish. There are dolphin mascots, dolphin door handles, dolphin helmets and an amazing array of dolphin decorative art. We have kept dolphins as "pets" and performers. Yet none of this equates to seeing dolphins in the wild, behaving as dolphins should.

The author explores the role of dolphins in the media, from movies to comic books. He is not complimentary of the way we have portrayed these mammals. We tend to glorify these animals as smart, semi-humans while ignoring their real and fascinating lives.

I enjoyed reading all the chapters and felt the author presented information in an unbiased manner that was thought provoking. Dolphins is a fascinating and well written book and I am delighted that I was forced to "volunteer."

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