

of botany, ecology and evolution combined into a picture of plants and people and ends with an evaluation of where we are and where we are going. If everyone read and understood this book – if everyone had the knowledge and the respect for life and the inquiring and sensitive mind of its author – we would be in a better position to save the world.

This book is an example of outstanding communication. It provides biologists with what they need to know to teach, but it is not just for the biologist, nor just for Americans who spend nineteen billion dollars

annually on leisure-time activities related to flowers and plants – it is for anyone. Behind the provocative title is a beautifully written book describing what flowering plants are, how they have influenced the evolution of life, contributed to the origin of humans and enabled humans to become the masters of our planet with the responsibility to manage its resources properly. It is so far from being just another book!

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ENVIRONMENT

Guide to Deserts

By Andrew Warren and Tony Allan (General Editors). 2006. Firefly Books, 66 Leek Crescent, Richmond Hill, Ontario L4B 1H1 Canada. 240 pages. \$19.95 Paper.

After reading this book I realised I have never been to “see” a desert. I searched for Scimitar-horned Oryx (northern Sahara). I marvelled at the marine life off the Peruvian-Chilean coast (Sechura-Atacama desert). I have visited the impressive Abu Simbel temples (Libyan desert). But I have not really looked at the desert for its own sake. This is a mistake I will not repeat. While I have not been completely unobservant there are many subtleties I have missed. In future I will look for zengens, desert pavement, inselbergs and yardangs.

Deserts is a neat, small book in which the author defines deserts and describes the climatic conditions that shape their landscapes. He gives examples of the different types of desert and illustrates the impact wind and – yes – water have had on the land and its inhabitants. There are six chapters on aspects of deserts and an atlas of the major desert areas. The chapters cover wildlife such as plants, invertebrates and mammals and how they are adapted to thrive in an arid ecosystem. The people of the desert, their food, clothes, homes, customs and religions are described. This is an important chapter with the current focus of news from the deserts of Badiyat Ash Sham (Iraq) and Dasht-E-Margow (Afghanistan). The authors explain the riches of the desert. Not just oil, but farming and mining. They also look at conservation issues and the damage done by human activity. After reading this material I am more convinced we need to re-assess the use of water for irrigation.

The atlas is really a field guide of the world’s 14 major arid zones [Canada’s minuscule desert in British Columbia is not mentioned]. In addition to a map there are descriptions of each area’s key characteristics. This includes some history, the people and key issues as well as a physical description. The authors have written a special chapter on visiting deserts to encourage people to see these special places.

There are plenty of photos and illustrations. These have been chosen not so much as pretty pictures, but to illustrate the points in the text. They range from the stark beauty of Monument Valley, through the rock-cut ruins at Petra to simple depictions of dunes. They show the faces and costumes of Tuareg, Berber and Bedouin (but not Navajo or Apache). The author has not missed mine sites, luxury hotels or aerial views in making his selection. One photo supposedly containing Giraffe, Ostriches and Eland shows six Oryx, some distant gazelles (presumably Springbock) but no Eland.

This book is very interesting to read just because it puts deserts in perspective. For someone like me who goes to places looking for something special, this book gives added value to a trip. For all of us it gives a wonderful background on where desert’s ecosystem fits in the world’s biosphere. The authors have convinced me that deserts are important and I will pay more attention in the future. Buy this book for yourself.

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