

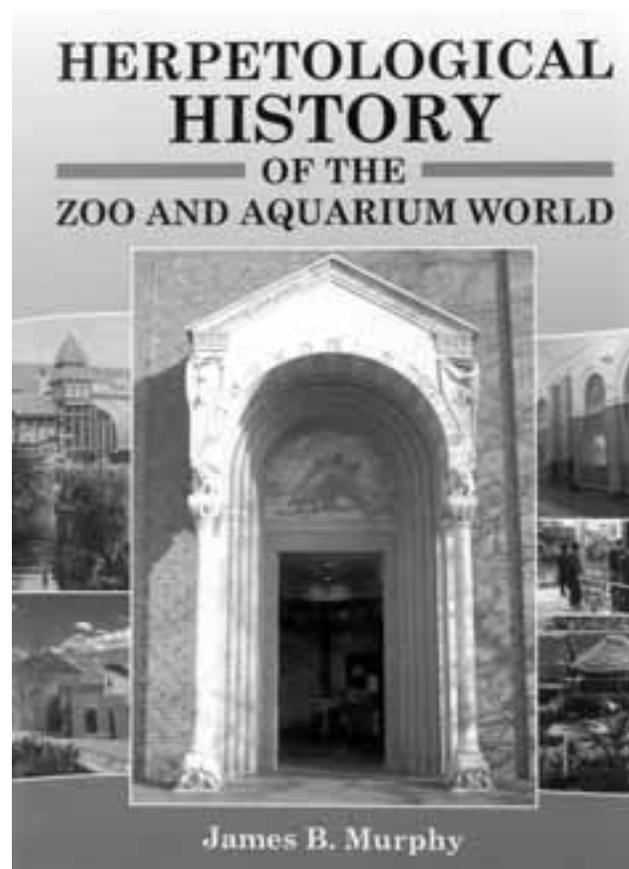
BOOK REVIEWS

Herpetology in the Zoo and Aquarium World

Herpetological History of the Zoo and Aquarium World. 2007. By James B. Murphy. Krieger Publishing Company. xv + 327 p. ISBN 1-57524-285-0. \$79.50 (hardcover).

This is a remarkable volume of work that is as notable for its depth and thoroughness as for its warm celebration of a history of institutions and individuals that could only be told by Jim Murphy. Murphy's time in the Special Collections Library at the Smithsonian's Natural History Museum is evident. The book is loaded with wonderfully incisive and ironic quotes from obscure sources and images from throughout the history of the profession. In separate sections, Murphy recounts the stories and traditions of the discipline from the various perspectives that define zoo and aquarium herpetology — taxa, individuals, programs, and institutions. This approach leads to some redundancy, but, somewhat ironically, is simultaneously efficient and highly readable. The approach is appropriate, for example, because one cannot truly understand the inestimable impact of Roger Conant solely from the perspectives of the Toledo or Philadelphia zoos. Likewise, the remarkable contributions of those institutions cannot be appreciated only through their associations with Dr. Conant. Similarly, describing the historical importance of crocodilians in the bestiary—menagerie—modern zoo transition would be impossible by simply listing which institutions had published the most papers or successfully bred which species. This neat multifaceted approach is broadened by the inclusion of a unique chapter entitled “Historical Vignettes” that highlights programs, twist-of-fate stories, or simple but important ideas. Here, Murphy's story-telling style works well in relating a series of compelling tales that expand the confines of biographical or institutional sketches. These are labeled with interest-catching titles, such as “Why Galápagos Land Iguanas From Baltra Island Are Not Extinct.”

The chapter entitled “Evolution of a Discipline” is built around a taxonomic framework that highlights major advances in the field in terms of, for example, simply getting snakes to eat in captivity or the remarkable insights into snake behavior that could only have been gathered from healthy, captive individuals. What really struck me in this review was the lack of effort on the part of zoo herpetologists in the realms of taxonomy and morphology. This is a shame, given the access to countless specimens and variants that typifies the discipline. In this vein, I believe I may have detected the only oversight in this otherwise terrific book, as I found no references to the seminal papers on reptilian morphology and evolution by George Rabb (Brookfield Zoo) and his colleague Hymen Marx (Field Museum of Natural History). This chapter, as important as it is, is a bit difficult to read, as Murphy was forced to include as many references to published works as possible (one of his stated metrics of a zoo's historical impact) and, given the uneven spread



of such papers taxonomically and topically, the chapter varies greatly in its depth of coverage. While perhaps a clumsy read, I shudder at the thought of having to organize and write such a review.

The chapter “Pioneers in Zoo Herpetology” and the closing chapters highlighting significant institutions from throughout the world are the heart and soul of the book. These could have been dull accounts of persons, places, dates, and discipline-firsts, except that Murphy personalizes each topic with his own experiences and perceptions. For an author to inject so much of himself into a work like this is always a bit risky. If poorly done, it reeks of arrogance. However, with his usual story-telling eloquence and his famously self-effacing personality, Murphy succeeds. Few curators or keepers in the field today have heard of the inimitable Joe Laszlo of the San Antonio Zoo, but thanks to Murphy his legend lives.

The chapter “Evolution of an Idea” was my favorite. Murphy takes the reader on a historical (and highly personal) journey through the remarkable transition through which zoo herpetology passed in a time span shorter than a single career. Murphy helps us realize that zoo-based conservation programs

were in place for mammals and birds while herp departments remained unable to determine the gender of their charges and had standing orders with people who poached rattlesnake dens! However, Murphy repeatedly makes the point that the transition is still far from complete — especially in the case of amphibians, which remain an afterthought in all but a very few programs. Nevertheless, the current respectable state of zoo herpetology is attributable to individuals like Roger Conant, James Oliver, and, of course, James B. Murphy. Murphy reminds us of times when representatives of zoos were not really welcome at scientific conferences, when research papers by zoo personnel or those based on work at zoos were not considered worthy of publication, and when the animals themselves were not considered worthy of conservation. With such a dramatic conceptual turn in their histories, zoos are fortunate that Murphy places this

remarkable transition in an appropriate perspective. A nice touch also is that this transition figures heavily in the Foreword by the late Roger Conant. How appropriate that this book provides us with one more bit of wisdom from the undisputed “godfather” of zoo herpetology.

Murphy relates, with great pride, the progress zoo herpetology programs have made, mainly by emphasizing their very real contributions, including their leading role in the development of important conservation programs such as the Declining Amphibian Population Task Force. Reading this book made me proud of our profession — and that’s a nice feeling. Thanks, Jim!

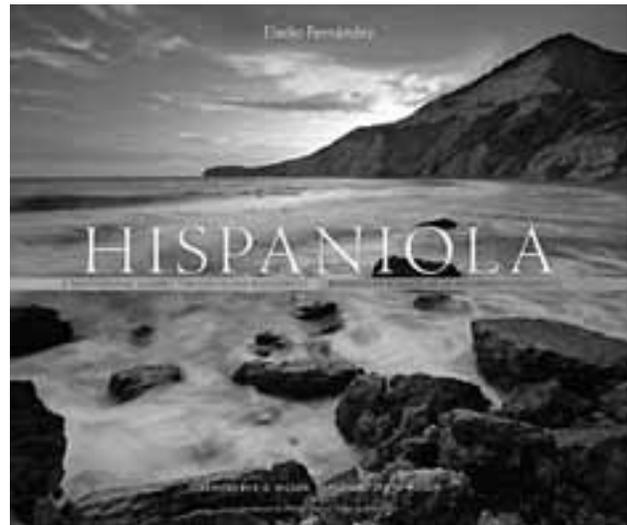
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Island Paradise

Hispaniola. A Photographic Journey through Island Biodiversity. Biodiversidad a Través de un Recorrido Fotográfico. 2007. By Eladio Fernández. The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts. xx + 374 pp. Hardcover — ISBN-10: 0-674-02628-4 — \$ 60.

My first trip to the West Indies was to the Dominican Republic. I’ve since spent considerable time on other islands, but when I’m asked which is my favorite, I always come back to Hispaniola. Rather than attempt to explain (usually in vain) why the island is so enticing, I now can direct anyone to Eladio Fernández’s profusely illustrated book that so eloquently defines the island’s natural beauty through the discerning eyes of a knowledgeable naturalist and gifted photographer. A total of 375 color photographs, many of them covering two facing pages in this coffee-table volume, show flowers, landscapes, insects, birds, and, of particular interest, amphibians and reptiles. Better yet, in many instances, the reader is not just greeted with portraits, but is immersed into natural habitats as pollinators visit flowers, predators consume prey, and anoles fan their dewlaps intent on attracting a mate or dissuading a rival. Even the vistas emanate life in a way seldom experienced through photographs.

This is a volume of images, some subtle, many powerful, all beautiful. The text is almost an afterthought, yet no less valuable — once one finds the strength to turn away from the photographs. All text is bilingual (English and Spanish), from the title to the acknowledgments. The foreword by noted naturalist Edward O. Wilson deftly provides the context that makes the volume so appealing — that the beauty portrayed is ephemeral, all the more so for lack of a human commitment to treasure and preserve it. Philippe Bayard, of the Société Audubon Haïti, states explicitly how effectively art can promote conservation. The photographer’s note by Fernández includes a somewhat wistful wish that this book may “raise awareness and spark an interest in preserving [his] island’s natural heritage.” Additional “essays” by a virtual who’s who of Neotropical biologists address the diversity of Hispaniola’s birds (Steven C. Latta and Christopher C. Rimmer), mammals (Charles A. Woods and José A. Ottenwalder), amphib-



ians and reptiles (S. Blair Hedges), insects (Brian Ferrell), vegetation (Milcíades Mejía and Ricardo García), and fungi (Timothy J. Baroni and Sharon A. Cantrell). All are eloquent, concise, and consistent in acknowledging both the unique nature and perverse fragility of the island’s habitats and their denizens.

The book effectively surprises, entertains, and pleases on each subsequent page. Only the all-too consistently dark images (undoubtedly attributable to cost-cutting decisions on the part of the publisher, otherwise not known to pinch pennies) detract — but fortunately not to the point where the grandeur of the subject or the gift of the artist are compromised. I only wish I could have avoided this one criticism of what is otherwise one of the best packages under one cover to come along in many, many years. Anyone who has experienced the islands or who wishes to do so some day should buy a copy, curl up in a warm chair on a cold night, and dream of paradise — before it’s too late.

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