

Book Review

WHALES AND DOLPHINS OF THE SOUTHERN AFRICAN SUBREGION. Peter B. Best. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 2007. ISBN 978-0-521-89710-5, 336 pp.

The back cover of *Whales and Dolphins of the Southern African Subregion* perhaps encapsulates the immense scope of this book far better than I can. The book covers cetaceans inhabiting an immense area, from the equator to Antarctica, between the 20°W and 80°E longitudes. It covers marine habitats from tropical coral reefs and sea grass beds, islands, windswept seas pounding on exposed and often rocky shores, open ocean and sub-Antarctic islands, to the icy shores of Antarctica. As a consequence of this diversity of habitat, the area is inhabited by almost two thirds of known cetacean species, ranging from the small spectacled porpoise to the blue whale.

Peter Best has been at work in this region for some 40 years and, thus, has a wealth of experience and knowledge of the species inhabiting the region. He has acted as mentor to many researchers, including me, and all have benefited from his insights, knowledge, and advice. I think it would not be too bold to suggest that Peter has mentored the study of cetaceans in Southern Africa; he has set the benchmark; and without him, our knowledge would not be as extensive.

The book covers what is known (published, but some of it unpublished) about 50 whale and dolphin species and the lone porpoise species known to inhabit the area. Each account is thoroughly comprehensive, including recently published information covering the animals' natural history, distribution, skeletal data, and conservation status. Many of the accounts are accompanied by Peter's own anecdotes, thoughts, and recollections, accumulated over his many years of working in the region. These make the book a pleasure to read, rather than just a reference work.

The illustrations are superb as Peter Folkens' illustrations always are. Anyone working with cetaceans and other marine mammals knows this already. They are accurate in morphological detail and colour, though I have an issue with some of the regional colour differences displayed by Southern African cetaceans.

To bring together, in one book, what is known of 51 species in this region was, I am certain, a labour of love and dedication and, for this alone,

this book is worth having. As a one-stop reference work for the region, this book is supreme. I suspect that the scope and influence of this book will be unmatched any time soon, perhaps never! For all these reasons, this book is an invaluable addition to the literature on Southern African cetaceans.

This is not a field guide, however, nor is it a coffee table book. It is too big and bulky to be the former, and there are not enough photographs of good quality and size to be the latter. Consequently, and in the face of stiff competition from numerous other recent publications, I doubt that the book will have wide appeal, which is a pity.

There are also one or two fundamental mistakes, which detract from this otherwise excellent reference work. For example, the second sentence of the "Introduction" reads, "They [Cetaceans] are the only mammals to spend their entire lives in water and have exchanged a layer of hair for a thick coating of insulating blubber." This sentence could equally describe the Sirenia! But these are minor issues, which I'm sure Peter will address in future reprints.

Overall, I would not hesitate to recommend this book as a one-stop reference book for anyone interested in the cetaceans of the Southern African subregion. For that matter, I would recommend it to anyone anywhere interested in a good, comprehensive reference book. I anticipate that all new (post)graduate students will use it as a first stop for information, and I hope that Peter will keep it updated in any reprints.

Vic Cockcroft
Centre for Dolphin Studies
Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University
P.O. Box 1856
Plettenberg Bay
6600
South Africa
E-mail: info@dolphinstudies.co.za
www.dolphinstudies.org