

Book Review

DOLPHINS, WHALES, AND MANATEES OF FLORIDA: A GUIDE TO SHARING THEIR WORLD. John E. Reynolds III and Randall S. Wells. University Press of Florida, 2003. ISBN 0-8130-2687, 148 pp., PBK: 14.95 USD.

Dolphins, Whales, and Manatees of Florida is the result of decades of the authors' research and personal experiences in Florida and is aimed at a broad, general audience. While a significant portion of the book is devoted to species accounts—particularly accounts of the bottlenose dolphin and the Florida manatee—and is intended to be a general reference for the public, I feel that the subtitle, "A Guide to Sharing Their World," gives away the real purpose of the book. Reynolds and Wells have seen (and continue to see) the effects that human activities in Florida have on marine mammals. Animals getting hit by watercraft. Animals entangled in fishing gear of all sorts. Animals swallowing fishing hooks. Habitat destruction from historically unbridled coastal development that eliminates critical habitat. And, who really knows what effects the chemical pollutants in the marine ecosystem are having on these animals? The authors could easily have added sea turtles and water birds to their list. They have personally observed the effects that human activities have had, not only on dolphins and manatees, but on Florida wildlife in general. The controversy over who "owns" the coastal waterways of Florida (people or the wildlife, especially the manatee) has become highly polarized in recent years, to a point approaching violence in some cases. For manatees, there is no middle ground: Love them or hate them. Reynolds and Wells not only want to educate the public about Florida's marine mammals, but they also want to let them know that we share their environment and not the other way around. Dolphins and manatees inhabited Florida waters long before humans, although one regularly hears or reads that the manatee is an "exotic" species in Florida.

So, is there anything wrong with this book? The World Wide Web has become a nearly instantaneous source of information—from excellent to total garbage—on just about any subject that you can imagine (and a few that you can't!). The Web, by its very nature, is incredibly dynamic and changes, literally, by the second. Authors (myself included) find it useful to include Web addresses as

references in certain types of publications. While we try to select URLs that are likely to be "permanent," we cannot guarantee it. I tested the URLs in Chapter 6 and one (the one I was really interested in) has disappeared from cyberspace.

A lesson to be learned from this book is that the people of Florida share the habitat of all plants and wildlife and not the other way around. There can be a middle ground. There must be a middle ground if we want to keep Florida ecosystems in some way intact. We can share their environment, but first we have to understand it, and we have to be willing to compromise. Then, we actually have to carry out the compromise. Chapter 6, "For the Concerned Citizen," lists a number of different ways that interested individuals of all ages can learn about Florida's marine mammals and how to conserve them. This book is a great way to get started.

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