

## Book Review

ENCYCLOPEDIA OF MARINE MAMMALS (3rd ed.). Bernd Würsig, J. G. M. Thewissen, & Kit Kovacs. Academic Press, London, 2018. ISBN 13: 978-0-12-804327-1, 1,157 pp.

Encyclopedia as a literary genre saw the light in the mid-1700s in France under the impulse of Denis Diderot (1751), who viewed in this new publication style a great tool “for people to be able to inform themselves and to know things.” This, in fact, embodied perfectly the spirit of the Enlightenment movement, which saw reason and knowledge as the primary societal sources of authority and legitimacy.

Quite fittingly, the *Encyclopedia of Marine Mammals* is designed for people—any people, from learned laypersons to generic scientists, but also to marine mammalogists—to be able to inform themselves and to know all things related to marine mammals.

This is already the 3rd edition of this work, greeting the reader with a captivating picture on its front cover of a gang of exuberant dusky dolphins. The first edition appeared in 2002; the second in 2009. Each new edition was justified by the need for revising and updating entries given the current vigorous development of marine mammal knowledge in the fields of science and policy. Editors of the current edition are Bernd Würsig, J. G. M. Thewissen, and Kit Kovacs. These three do not need an introduction, nor do most of the 289 contributors who were carefully picked among the best experts in their respective fields.

Their work has resulted in a mighty tome, 1,157 pages strong (a bit less than the 2nd edition, however, which had 1,300 pages). I have not weighed the volume, but I think it is almost 5 kg! Entries—a total of 255 of them—include descriptions of all the extant marine mammal species alongside the main extinct taxa, as well as a variety of subjects pertaining, among other areas, to marine mammal anatomy, physiology, evolution, ecology, behaviour, biogeographical regions, research methods, threats, conservation, management, policy, and ethical considerations. Although the entries have the lion share of the work, several other features add significantly to the overall provision of knowledge: a list of marine mammal species, with their authors; the biographies of scientists who have significantly contributed to the progress of marine mammal science from the 16th

century to the present day (although I was a bit surprised that the earliest pioneers in the field, such as Aristotle and Pliny the Elder, were omitted from the list); a very useful glossary; and an index. References pertaining to each entry are listed at the end of the entries themselves. The inside front and back covers illustrate the evolutionary paths of the different marine mammal taxa, a colourful representation of their past history providing a helpful temporal perspective.

The *Encyclopedia* has resulted in a formidable reference source. I have the PDF icon on my desktop ready to be consulted when I need to get started on something new; and when the subject to be investigated has to do with marine mammals, I have learned that starting from the *Encyclopedia* provides faster and more solid results than other sources (Google, for example). Of course, one should not be looking for consistency of treatment in such a type of work. Some items can be covered exhaustively (e.g., ambergris or baculum); others can only be summaries (e.g., Antarctic marine mammals), but they are still quite helpful summaries to satisfy the curious as well as to get the scholar started on more demanding searches.

Also, considering that the *Encyclopedia* is the result of the independent production of nearly 300 different authors, one should not look for consistency of views either, particularly when the subjects address issues of policy or ethics. I see this as a very healthy condition because different or even diverging views are the natural result of the complexity of some matters which pertain to the values we give to things that matter to us.

I cannot conclude this review without mentioning the significant advantages deriving from the *Encyclopedia of Marine Mammals* being available both in hard copy and electronic format. Granted, the *Encyclopedia* is a very good-looking volume that figures prominently on any bookshelf: one can leaf through its pages, smell the ink and the paper, write notes in the margins, and all that. However, the electronic version has a number of very handy advantages that the paper version cannot have. Portability is so obvious (particularly when the alternative weighs several kg) that mentioning it is almost embarrassing. A much more powerful feature of the electronic format is the ability to search, and even to cross-reference. Let me make an example. If you look for “ethics” in the “Index,” which is an excellent index, you are referred to

“ethical research paradigms,” “marine mammals and humans,” “marine mammals and humans meet,” and “moral status of marine mammals.” Basically, all these references are being made to the entry “Ethics,” authored by Toni Frohoff and Marc Bekoff. If, however, you look for the string “ethics” in the PDF search function, you find the word mentioned 34 times in the volume’s text, many of which are outside of the “Ethics” entry. In other words, if you are looking for any particular subject, in a few seconds you will be able to sift through all the 1,157 pages of the most complete and updated compendium of marine mammal knowledge and find mentions to that subject that would remain otherwise hidden in that ocean of words, short of painstakingly looking for them page after page. No index, no matter how detailed, would be able to achieve such a feat. Denis Diderot would be delighted.

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### Literature Cited

Diderot, D. (1751). *Encyclopédie, ou dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers* [Encyclopedia, or a systematic dictionary of the sciences, arts, and crafts]. Paris, France: Robert Bénard, engraver.