

Book reviews

Women in Wildlife Science: Building Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion edited by Carol L. Chambers and Kerry L. Nicholson (2022) 400 pp., Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, USA. ISBN 978-1-4214-4502-1 (hbk), USD 49.95.

The importance of biodiversity in maintaining functional living systems is a fundamental principle in ecology and conservation. As scientists, we recognize that a diverse ecosystem—filled with interacting elements occupying different niches, performing various ecological functions, and arising from distinct evolutionary legacies—contributes to resilience, reorganization and renewal. ‘Each mammal, bird, plant, fungus, insect, amphibian, reptile, and soil microbe’, as the authors of this book say, ‘has a unique part to play’ (p. 4).

Although we work tirelessly to promote diversity in nature, we often fail to value and cultivate the same diversity in our professional environment. *Women in Wildlife Science: Building Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion* opens by highlighting the well-established fact that diverse communities, whether ecological or otherwise, are strong, productive and resilient. Research shows that groups with gender, cognitive and cultural diversity excel in problem-solving, creativity and impact. Yet even today, the wildlife profession remains largely homogenous: a field dominated by Western, white, middle-class men, which fails to reflect the diverse community it serves, and which can stagnate from drawing too heavily on a single culture, history and perspective. Despite the passion and prevalence of women and people from marginalized communities entering wildlife science, we are often faced with an unwelcoming, unhealthy and unsafe environment that quickly weeds out those that do not fit the mould.

The authors of this collection represent a wonderfully diverse—yet systemically under-represented and oppressed—segment of wildlife science. They come from various cultural, economic and racial backgrounds and bring with them a wide variety of lived experiences. Throughout the book, they shed light on the unique barriers faced by marginalized communities within the profession, contextualizing these challenges within broader histories of oppression, conflict, colonialism, racism, ableism, gender discrimination and ageism. They demonstrate how barriers to progression manifest at all career stages and within different institutional settings, ranging from subtle biases and microaggressions to overt discrimination. The intersectional nature of these challenges can compound the difficulties

faced by individuals, leading to what is often referred to as a leaky pipeline, whereby many women enter the field but few attain leadership positions or platforms of significant visibility.

However, the book goes beyond merely showcasing these struggles: it offers actionable strategies to bring about systemic change within the wildlife profession. Each chapter highlights the role of community and support, of visibility and mentorship, of sponsors, advocates and allies. By providing specific guidance and exercises, *Women in Wildlife Science* encourages readers to examine their own biases and rethink their interactions with colleagues, recruitment practices and organizational structures, aiming not just for equality but for equity.

As a woman in the wildlife space, and more specifically one with a particular focus on uplifting and empowering other women in the field, I found this book to be an invaluable resource. The lived experiences of the authors, buttressed by research and statistics, were in equal parts uplifting and hard to digest. I felt pangs as I saw actions of my own supervisors, advisors and colleagues reflected in the stories told by others; I felt connected with this community and grateful for these other women’s honesty and vulnerability—I felt that I was not alone. However, I acknowledge my own privileges as a middle-class, white, able-bodied and childless woman who has neither suffered historical traumas nor faced the same aggressions or physical challenges that others endure. This book serves as an important reminder of the responsibility we have as individuals with privilege to educate ourselves and use our power and position to actively create safe and inclusive environments.

Creating such environments requires conscious, collective effort and understanding, time and energy, and a willingness to go beyond box-ticking exercises in diversity/inclusion efforts that fail to address the underlying biases. *Women in Wildlife Science* offers an excellent starting point—for individuals and organizations alike—from which to begin examining our relationships with marginalized female communities and working together to rebuild our somewhat degraded professional ecosystem to one where we can all flourish, thrive and work together for a better future for nature.

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Coral Reefs of Australia: Perspectives from Beyond the Water’s Edge edited by Sarah Hamylton, Pat Hutchings & Ove Hoegh-Guldberg (2022) 344 pp., CSIRO Publishing, Clayton, Australia. ISBN 978-1-4863-1548-2 (pbk), AUD 99.99.

Part encyclopedia, part coffee table book, part testimonial—this ambitious volume on the reefs of Australia surprises and delights. The volume makes it immediately obvious that Australia’s marine heritage goes far beyond its fabled Great Barrier Reef, with a variety of morphologically and ecologically different reef systems found off virtually all the continent’s coasts. Essay-like contributions are accompanied by stunning and sometimes unusual images, such as the decline-in-action photographs overlaying a large bleached coral head with one subsequently colonized by algae (pp. 272–273), the dramatic aerial photograph of contained coral spawn developing into larvae (pp. 292–293), or the graphic showing the connectivity between estuaries and offshore reefs (p. 162).

This is not a compendium on coral species in the style of J.E.N. Veron’s landmark 1993 work *Corals of Australia and the IndoPacific*, and neither is it a coherent story of reef life akin to Charles Birkland’s eloquent book *Life and Death of Coral Reefs*, from 1997. Instead, it is a combination of science and storytelling, presenting a variety of perspectives in diverse styles of writing.

The volume begins with brief but illuminating geomorphological and biological descriptions of the many varied reef systems around Australia’s coasts and further afield in places such as Cocos and Christmas Islands. Starting with Western Australia rather than the Great Barrier Reef is unexpected and refreshing.

In a few places, the contributors appear to assume background knowledge that readers may not necessarily possess; for example, mass coral bleaching is first mentioned on page 8 but not explained until page 146. Similarly, the map on page 29, and a few others, make it difficult to locate specific reef systems described in the text, perhaps because the authors assume readers are already familiar with the geography of these marine systems. But these are minor shortcomings that do not detract from the book’s broader value.

The oral histories of Indigenous Peoples, reaching back 60,000 years or more, provide an important perspective on the corals of Australia, and much of the book brings this view into focus for those accustomed to a

western or more mechanistic understanding of reefs. A quote in the preface by Ian McCalman makes this point early on: ‘coral reefs are also products of human perception that have been imagined into existence down the millennia’. By bringing in perspectives of Aboriginal people and Traditional Owners, the book encourages us to think differently about reefs, much like Philip E. Steinberg’s *The Social Construction of the Ocean* prompted natural scientists to rethink their characterization of the sea and contemplate the cognitive and cultural biases that influence how we assess, communicate about and relate to nature. Several entries speak to *The Dreaming* as a process of relatedness, whereby reefs are associated with certain clans, and patrilineal clans ‘hold’ the country. It is hard to imagine a more solid foundation for effective stewardship of reefs.

These reflections on the different relationships people have with reefs (and reefs have with people) sit in stark contrast to a later section of the book entitled *Scientists as Advocates for Australia’s Coral Reefs*. Giving a history of scientist-led study and management of reefs in Australia, including the ontogeny of the Australian Coral Reef Society and the Great Barrier Reef Committee, the chapter notes the advice given by coral reef scientists in development projects and the role Australian scientists have played in shaping our understanding of reefs worldwide. Surprisingly—especially given the book’s title—there is no mention of social scientists, nor any other ways of knowing that have equal value in improving our understanding of and driving advocacy for protecting reefs.

The subsequent section on Conservation and Protection of Australia’s Coral Reefs is filled with colorful storytelling, fitting for a history of conservation that is neither linear nor conventional. This section is honest and revealing, exposing not only good intentions but also the unintended consequences of conservation advocacy and government policy. This then sets up the final section of the book entitled *A Changing Climate for Australian Reefs*, which, although supported by data and citations of scientific publications,

begs the question whether planners and managers are being realistic and honest about the uncertainties that lie ahead. It also left me wondering whether in Australia—although this applies equally anywhere else—we are capable of learning from past mistakes and creating a more sustainable future.

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The Good Garden: How to Nurture Pollinators, Soil, Native Wildlife, and Healthy Food—All in Your Own Backyard by Chris McLaughlin (2023)

312 pp., Island Press, Washington, DC, USA. ISBN 978-1-64283-215-0 (pbk), USD 34.99.

The first thing to say about this gardening book is that it is firmly planted in a North American context. It speaks of the plants, insects, animals, growing zones and frost dates for the 50 states of the Union (yes, it covers Hawaii and Alaska, too). But even for readers outside the USA who, like me, love not only gardening but also soaking up new knowledge about horticulture from anywhere in the world, learning from Chris McLaughlin in *The Good Garden* will be a great pleasure. Wherever you are in the world, this book has something for you—so vast is its catalogue of facts and suggestions.

Written in response to the surge of interest in back gardens that occurred under lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic, the book aims to provide a practical guide to making the most of whatever outdoor space you have—with a focus on doing so in a planet-friendly way. Despite this focus, McLaughlin is not preachy; her advice is balanced and evidence-based, and she explains in practical terms why a sustainable approach to gardening makes for sound horticultural practice as well as providing healthy food for the body and soul.

I lingered on the chapter about pollinators and wildlife with fascination as I read, from my wintry surroundings in the UK, about praying mantises and hummingbirds, and

how to create habitats supporting the life cycle of the migratory monarch butterfly. My list of notes with ideas to take to my own garden in the springtime grew as I read: construct vertical growing structures, buy self-pollinating dwarf fruit tree, convert old bucket into mini pond, avoid histoplasmosis. McLaughlin also reminded me that, although I can get lost in the garden being ‘mine’ because I think about it and work with it so much, gardens and gardening are so much better when shared; community features highly in the book.

Reading the chapter about healthy soil, I was struck by how little mention there is of the use of peat. In the UK, peat is frequently referenced in horticultural discussions; however, this is not something that McLaughlin covers to any great extent. Perhaps it is sufficient that her focus is on regenerative techniques, leaving little need for bagged compost, peat-free or not.

Chris McLaughlin has been gardening for over 40 years, and is the author of nine books on nature, gardening, small livestock and her family farm in the foothills of Northern California. It is clear that she knows her stuff. I particularly admired how she cleverly packs in so much practical theory, plenty of which I recognized from the textbooks of my years training as a horticulturalist, yet she conveys it in the manner of a friend strolling with you through your garden, sharing thoughts and ideas. She trusts the reader will be interested and follow along when she refers to aspects of gardening that may seem academic or complex, such as international conventions, or chemical equations relating to the soil. McLaughlin presents these topics skilfully and gently. Nothing in her writing style is lofty, making this a friendly, accessible book, from which readers can broaden their knowledge and learn valuable skills to put into practice. And as it is full of beautiful pictures, too, it makes a great companion for whiling away rainy days, planning for when you next get back out there with your hands in the soil (or dirt, as the author might say).

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