

# Book reviews

## **Sharks. A Photographer's Story**

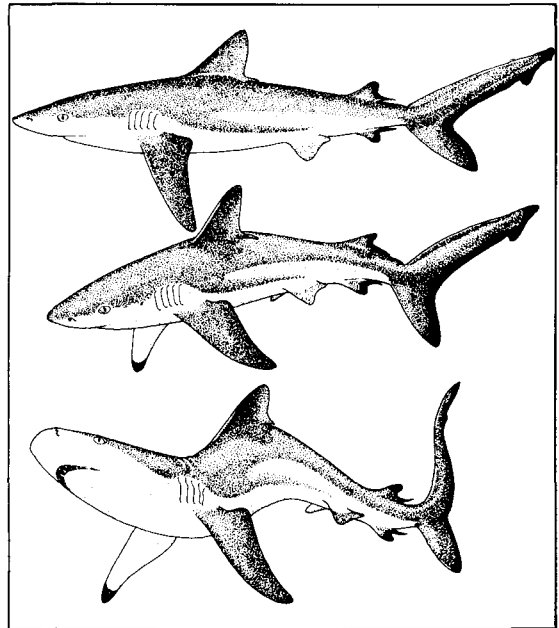
Jeremy Stafford-Deitsch

Headline, London, 1987, 200 pp., HB £14.95

Unlike bony fish, sharks grow slowly and have a low reproductive rate (most give birth to only a few young after a long gestation period), so that they are at particular risk from overfishing, and long-term shark fisheries are probably not sustainable. Therefore it is important to know more about shark biology and to dispel the myths that have grown up about them so that a rational approach to the conservation of threatened species can be made. Most books on sharks are illustrated by photographs of dead sharks and by pictures of small species taken in aquaria, but this excellent book is profusely illustrated by unique photographs of sharks in the wild, giving a very different idea of the real nature of the form and variety of these fascinating fish. The author has successfully combined an entertaining narrative of his world-wide search for underwater shark photographs with much up-to-date information about sharks and their natural history and behaviour. Although he modestly remarks that he is not a scientist, the second chapter, which deals with the structure and classification of the 300 or so species of shark alive today, is one of the best short summaries for the non-specialist of the nature of sharks that I have found in any book. Only a very few small errors have crept in, one being that it is not now thought that the megamouth shark has luminous organs in its mouth to attract its shrimp-like prey (p. 10). Again, the highly remarkable electroreceptive system of sharks (capable of detecting electrical fields as small as that produced by a 1.5 v torch battery at 1500 m!) consists of sensory cells clustered in ampullae, which are linked to the skin surface by low resistance jelly-filled tubes, and would certainly not work if their pores were filled with wax, as stated on p. 34. But these are small points and, as a whole, the book is accurate and up to date, and a great deal of information is given in an interesting and very readable way. This is a book to be strongly recommended to anyone who wants to know more about sharks, and should do much to show why we must try to preserve this very striking and remarkable group of fish.

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Line drawings from *Sharks. A Photographer's Story* depict the normal swimming posture (top), mild threat display (centre) and acute threat display (bottom) of the grey reef shark.

## **The Natural History of Whales and Dolphins**

Peter G. H. Evans

Christopher Helm, Ltd, Kent, 1987, 343 pp., £13.95

Cetaceans seem to have attracted more than their fair share of books and this one ventures on well-trodden ground, but with a difference. There are 118 pages devoted to the expected chapters on who's who, what cetaceans are, how they evolved and where they are found. The difference comes in the later emphasis on behaviour and on British examples. There is also more about the smaller species, with less on the familiar great whales and how to kill them. Whale watching from the land and on special cruises has become popular lately; increasing knowledge about wild whales and also the demand for it. Peter Evans himself mounted such an expedition in 1980 off the continental shelf west of Britain, and co-ordinated the Mammal Society Cetacean Group, enabling the noteworthy emphasis on British species in his book. Recent developments in techniques and a more sym-

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pathetic approach to whales have meant that increased attention has been paid to collecting data by watching whales rather than dissecting them. There has been a dearth of this kind of study on wild whales, especially many of the smaller ones not normally caught by commercial whalers. Indeed previous whale books have often been dominated by information about the larger species based on material collected by whalers. This book helps redress the balance a little.

It was disappointing to see only one page devoted to the perennially interesting topic of strandings, but perhaps 340+ pages are insufficient to cover fully one of the largest orders of mammals.

This book is thoroughly up to date and is distinctly different from the many others either written or based on whales as they were known a decade ago. In company with other volumes in this series, it is terse and authoritative in style, supported by a bibliography of 32 pages and many text figures. There are also some particularly fine colour photographs of wild whales (not taken in dolphinarium!), including one of a group of narwhals seen from the air.

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### **The Sei Whale: Population Biology, Ecology and Management**

Joseph Horwood

Croom Helm, Beckenham, 1987, 373pp., HB £29.50

The sei whale is the third largest cetacean species. According to the early twentieth century whaling historian R. S. Haldane, it is also 'the most graceful of all the whales, as its proportions are so perfect . . .' Haldane further considered that ' . . . it is also far the best to eat, the flesh tasting of something between pork and veal, and quite tender.'

Unlike the likes of the right, sperm or bowhead, the role the sei has played in whaling history has been negligible. It was not fully described until 150 or so years ago, and was not exploited until more recently still; like most of the other

rorquals, the sei was too strong and too fast for the old whaling ships, and not until the advent of steampower and explosive harpoon grenades did it become a target for the world's whaling fleets. Even then, the sei wasn't intensively exploited until the 1950s, when the decline of blue and fin whale catches in the Antarctic made it the most profitable species to hunt. This honour was not only a dubious one, it was short-lived; after barely a decade, sei whale catches in the Southern Ocean peaked at around 22,000 and then sharply nose-dived, forcing the whaling industry to turn its attention to the hitherto-ignored minke whale.

It was during this period of intensive sei whale exploitation that scientists first started regularly taking samples from catches. As a result, there is a great deal more disparate information on the sei than there might otherwise have been, and much of it has been brought together in this detailed volume. Horwood—a principal scientific officer at the MAFF Directorate of Fisheries in Lowestoft, and a member of the British delegation to the International Whaling Commission—has summarized the material from several hundred papers on various aspects of the sei whale's physical characteristics, distribution, ecology and exploitation, and so provided a very worthwhile, comprehensive review of much of what is known about this species.

As the title implies, the emphasis of the book is on the sei whale's population biology and ecology, and the implications of this for the species's management. Thus, Horwood devotes some two-thirds of its content to describing such directly relevant details as stock size and separation, the history of sei whale exploitation, and reproduction, mortality and growth rates. He concludes by summarizing the state of our knowledge of the sei whale today, and recommending some possible research objectives for the future.

Unfortunately, although the text is of high quality, the typeface is, frankly, very poor, and looks as if it has been bashed out on the author's typewriter before being pasted up by the publisher. There are a few typographical errors, too, some of which—such as the graph that claimed that  $20 \times 10^{-3}$  seis were killed in one season—are slightly irritating.