

plants and their environments could spell disaster for the carefully evolved natural systems we so often take for granted. We are reminded, however, of the hope and opportunities that plants bring to help us solve the world's most pressing challenges. Those 120 species of coffee could improve resilience to climate change within cultivated strains, dandelions might be an unexpected, sustainable source of rubber, and the leaf structure of the lotus is already inspiring the development of self-cleaning, and therefore more eco-friendly, materials.

As with much of the natural world, the more one learns about the individual plant species and the stories that tell of our interactions with them—whether positive or negative—the more intriguing they become. *Around the World in 80 Plants* makes me want to find out yet more about the plants that are so often overlooked as a green background, or seen merely as scenery to frame the animals, yet are vital for supporting life on Earth. As this book so wonderfully shows, they are more than life-support machines: they provide colour, flavour and magic to our everyday lives, and we need to learn to appreciate them.

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Hats—A Very UNnatural History by
Malcolm Smith (2020) 194 pp., Michigan State
University Press, East Lansing, USA. ISBN
978-1611863475 (hbk), USD 44.95.

'For such simple garments hats have had a devastating impact on wildlife', so reads the first sentence on the inside cover of this fascinating book, which I found to be an emotional roller coaster. The first few chapters chart, in careful detail, the pattern of a rapidly increasing and insatiable demand for fur and feathers, decimating wildlife around the globe. Some of the facts and figures in the

documentation of these boom-and-bust industries beggar belief. For example, a total of 139,509 beaver pelts were exported from what is now Canada in one year (1787), 509 kg of ostrich feathers were imported to France in 1807, and a report tells of one London dealer warning he would no longer accept birds from New Zealand because he already had 385 of, the now Critically Endangered, kakapo. Although the author is careful not to attribute the subsequent catastrophic declines of the targeted species entirely to our demand for décor, it clearly played a central role. Thus, great crested grebes in Britain, whose ear frills were much sought after for ladies' hats, were almost hunted to extinction in the 19th century, ditto sea otters in the Arctic and beavers in North America. Added to the environmental tragedy was often a human and societal one. As the quarry became rare and prices increased, competition and conflict followed between trappers and Indigenous people, for example during the brutal North American beaver wars of the 1600s.

The author adds colour to the beautifully crafted text through quotes from other books, journals, expeditions and auction rooms. There are also glimpses into how the biology of a species made them more or less vulnerable to exploitation. Snowy egrets breed in huge colonies and this, combined with a showy display, made the males easy targets for mass harvesting. In contrast, flamingo feathers, whose colour is derived from the algae and brine shrimps on which the birds feed, lose their colour once the feather is shed—a lifeline for what would otherwise undoubtedly have been a much sought-after bird. And perhaps one of the most eye-opening aspects is the sheer range of birds that once adorned human heads, from birds of paradise and hummingbirds to various species of seabird including the Tristan albatross from Tristan da Cunha, one of the most isolated islands in the world.

Whereas the first six chapters make for grim reading, chapter seven lifts the spirits with stories of the 'six indomitable

Victorian Ladies who made a difference' (p. ii) to whom the book is dedicated. Between them, in the United States and Britain, they began the so-called anti-plumage movement that led to the establishment of Audobon and the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB), respectively. They were clever in their tactics, in how and where they sought support and in the way they were evidently able to deal with opposition. I loved the telling of the tale of how Emily Williamson, one of the founders of the RSPB, having been refused membership of the, then very male, British Ornithologists' Union responded by banning its members from joining the Society for the Protection of Birds (the precursor to the RSPB).

One of the remaining three chapters focuses briefly on the extraordinary revival of a demand for mammal fur driven by an obsession with the television folk hero Davy Crockett and his coonskin (raccoon) hat. Finally, the last two chapters turn the reader's attention to the future of the once ruthlessly exploited species, and of the hats and headgear they were exploited for. Their resilience has allowed some species to make a comeback after their persecution ended, only to face new threats of climate change and habitat loss. Although my immediate reaction was one of horror and disgust at our ability to exploit nature so destructively, it also made me reflect on how history will judge us and our current treatment of nature—is it actually any different from the rampant exploitation of the past? The current global pandemic we are living through is inexorably linked to our disregard and destruction of species and natural habitats. This book is a brilliantly detailed and beautifully written case study of how we can be a power for good or for evil when it comes to the natural world. It is a vital wake-up call to the need for us all to change and make a difference.

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