

BOOK REVIEW: Private Lives. An Exposé of Singapore's Rainforests. Wang Luan Keng, Darren C.J. Yeo, Kelvin K.P. Lim & Shawn K.Y. Lum (eds). 2012.

Singapore: Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research. 21.1 cm × 14.9 cm. 298 pp. Hardcover: ISBN 978-981-07-2472-6, price SGD 35. Paperback: ISBN 978-981-07-2473-3, price SGD 24.

This book is well worth noticing and owning because it celebrates the riches of the rain forest by providing, simply, a well-coordinated string of perspectives and anecdotes that introduce what rain forests are, nicely educating on key aspects of this vegetation formation and its plant and animal life. Its context is, firstly, to draw attention to Singapore's last-remaining natural treasures found in this amazingly complex vegetation type, but it really is a useful book for all of Southeast Asia generally because the material is applicable across the region.

There have been other attempts to present the rain forest to a general audience, but this book, crafted by natural history scientists and conservationists working together, achieves an excellent introduction for both the student as well as the informed general reader. Its size, too, allows for easy carrying about and storage, a veritable mini-compendium of tropical rain forests, their ecological significance, incredible plant and animal diversity, and the importance of further discovery and protection. The book cleverly infuses people-oriented elements to make its point. For example, the introduction does not fail to point out how communities are entrenched in botanical tradition, with roads named after plants, and so on. It is richly illustrated in colour throughout, which is quite necessary in a book with such a broad mission. There are just a few corrections, which the authors themselves take the trouble to point out (in their website <http://exxonmobil.rafflesmuseum.net/>) but this in no way diminishes the value of the book.

Logically structured, the Introduction lays out the importance of rain forests in maintaining genetic and species diversity, and as a key carbon sink, without hesitation. Its physical structure contributing to 3-dimensional complexity, to which transitional developmental phases of individual organisms, cohorts and communities give a temporal variability, is nicely presented. "Biotic Features" points out the dominance of tree forms and gives a sketch of the scientific ideas around how such levels of biodiversity are derived, emphasises the dynamic nature of forests through discussing the forest growth cycle and succession, and leads the reader comfortably through a slew of anecdotes about rain forest adaptations among plants. There is a highlight on mass flowering, a key feature of SE Asia's climax forests. "Moving Up" relates about climbing plants and epiphytes. Invertebrates get their own chapter. "Winging It" discusses creatures that fly or glide, as well as the curious adaptations among plants for wind dispersal; "Forest Buffet" tells of feeding strategies among animals; "Sylvan Symphony" recollects the chirps, songs, croaks and choruses contributed by a huge diversity of organisms that make the forest traveller's experience so fascinating.

The night brings a different world, as if the organisms have worked out a time-sharing schedule among themselves. The wonder of nocturnally active animals, the miracle of specialised night vision, and things that glow in the dark capture our attention. "Poisons, Fangs & Claws" bring on the realism of food capture as well as

chemical defences in both plants and animals (here the stinkbugs hold their own), and the weird and wonderful in both plant and animal armature. “Looks Can Be Deceiving” describes camouflage and mimicry, including the cross-kingdom mimicry among plants and animals. The story of decomposition is told via focussing on the agents of decay, and social organisms and ecological interdependence among plants and animals are dealt with using similarly short “stories”. Among the last chapters are “Jungle Grocery” that highlights our continued dependence on forest-derived materials and foods, and “Taking Stock, Taking Care”, before the final discussion on conserving and managing forests sensibly is presented.

“Eco-Warrior” seems a nice way to complete such an account. It is a salute, presented as a finale to this book, to Dr. Wee Yeow Chin, retired academic but tireless teacher and conservationist, whose own accounts of natural history have sustained interest around nature in Singapore and the region. It reminds us not to be complacent, because, like all things good and wonderful, rain forests can well disappear if we do not take the trouble to understand and protect them.

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