

Book Review

RIGHT WHALES: NATURAL HISTORY AND CONSERVATION. Phil Clapham. Worldlife Library, Voyageur Press, Stillwater, MN, USA. 2004. ISBN 0-896-5865-7X, 72 pp.

This book is an excellent summary of the biology and conservation status of right whales around the world, with an emphasis on the particular problems faced by right whales in the North Atlantic. It is written for the layperson in an easy conversational style, without sacrificing any of the scientific integrity required to detail the natural history features of this unusual creature. High-quality photographs illustrate many of the points discussed in the book. Dr. Clapham has interspersed historical and contemporary stories about right whales and whaling to keep things interesting, and he has enough first-hand encounters to add a genuine personal touch.

The book includes a summary of the history of right whaling; a brief lesson in the evolutionary background of whales; and good information on the feeding, behavior, and reproduction in the genus. There is an introduction to the value of individual photo-identification and genetic studies, which has anecdotes about a few of the whales that have interesting stories to tell. The chapter on conservation provides a succinct and informative view of the problems that northern hemisphere right whales face from shipping and fishing gear entanglements. In all, the author has done an extraordinary job in getting so much information into a highly readable and relatively compact text.

The only quibbles I have with the book are about the illustrations and their captions. All underwater and most of the surface photographs are of southern right whales, a point that will be lost on most readers, but has some subtle messages at odds with the text. Diving with right whales is probably not useful for conservation or science in most cases (and is prohibited in the U.S.), and while it provides great images for a book of this type, they should be accompanied by captions that warn readers not to try this at home. The photographs on pages 15, 19, 27, and 31 are all of a single, unusually light-colored calf (not albino as one caption indicates), suggesting dorsal white coloration frequently occurs in right whales when, in fact, it is exceedingly rare. Finally, the captions for the photographs on pages 39, 44, and 51 are wrong, and the one on page 52 is irrelevant. Illustrations

could have better complemented the excellent text if they had included historical images of whaling and some line drawings explaining body parts and feeding behavior.

Nevertheless, these are nitpicks that should not deter the would-be reader. This book will make an excellent addition to the bookshelf of any arm-chair scientist or budding naturalist, and it should inspire many people to care about an animal that urgently needs our attention. In this spirit, Dr. Clapham's book serves both the whales and the reading public exceedingly well.

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