

Book Review

MARINE MAMMALS OF INDIA. Kumaran Sathasivam. Universities Press (India) Private Limited, Hyderabad. 2004. ISBN 81-7371-465-7, 184 pp.

Despite the extensive coastline of the Indian subcontinent and its richness in marine species, there is, to date, an almost complete absence of comprehensive volumes reviewing the marine mammal fauna of the region. Most bibliographies are composed of fragmentary reports on strandings and fishing interactions that are dispersed among a galaxy of local publications, which, in most cases, are difficult or impossible to access for international readers. On the other hand, Indian popular books on the subject are almost non-existent. This volume attempts to partially fill the existing gap in both fields.

Marine Mammals of India takes the form and structure of a field guide addressed to the general public, but the contents also have the ambition of soundly reflecting current scientific knowledge. I must confess that, after learning that the author was a naval architect and mechanical engineer, I started reading the book with some reservation; however, although the treatment of some of the subjects was inevitably very superficial, I found only minor gaps or mistakes. Among these, it is noteworthy that although the author includes in his bibliography a recent publication (Kumaran, 2002), which critically reviews cetacean bibliographical records from India, a number of entries in this book's listing correspond to dubious or probably erroneous identifications.

The book covers all marine mammal species reported to occur in Indian waters as well as some others, like the ginkgo-toothed beaked whale, the Longman's beaked whale, and the southern bottlenose whale, that have been cited in neighbouring, though sometimes rather distant waters (i.e., the Seychelles or the Gulf of Aden). The right whale is included in the book, even though it is well-known—as the author recognizes—that the only record available for India is a misidentification. The fact that this species is treated at the same level as the others, and that it even enjoys depiction in a plate, may certainly lead the more general readers to confusion. This amplitude of scope contrasts with the exclusion of the Ganges river dolphin, a species that, as the most emblematic cetacean of India, certainly deserved inclusion in the volume.

The book is composed of three main sections. The first, about 25 pages long and of an introductory nature, is designed to inform the reader about the basic elements of marine mammal biology and conservation. It contains a short glossary; a key to scientific terms; and short chapters on evolution and systematics, marine mammal research in India, whaling and other conservation threats, and whale watching. The second section, about 100 pages long, constitutes the core of the volume and is composed of a species-by-species review of the Indian marine mammal fauna. Information here is organized following a classical field guide structure: scientific, international, and local common names; morphological description; habitat and distribution, including a checklist of records in India; and a final "Remarks" section ending with the IUCN cataloging for the species. Among the species accounts, the author includes some boxes discussing particular elements of interest. These range from mass strandings to diving, age determination, or communication of whales by sound. The contents of some of these boxes are surprising. One is composed of a long table compiling all records of unidentified baleen whales; except for archival purposes, this information is useless both to scientists and to whale amateurs. The book ends with a third section, which is integrated by chapters of rather heterogeneous scope: threats faced by marine mammals, a tabulated morphological identification aid with 10 plates containing photographs and drawings of the species, a list of bibliographic references, three indices, and four maps.

Overall, the book appears of limited practical use to scholars. It is eminently descriptive, with much emphasis on morphology and distribution, and is comparatively poor in information on population biology, behaviour and other aspects, which, as the forefront of marine mammalogy today, focus the attention of students. Thus, the book is clearly more directed to the nature lover than to the professional. Even as a basic field guide, however, the volume has shortages. The chapters dedicated to the species accounts include a detailed listing of all records in India, which appears per se of limited use. The descriptions of the species are only morphological and lack details about schooling, swimming behaviour, or diving patterns, as well as the cues necessary for the identification of the species at sea. Thus, while the guide is applicable to the classification of a stranded specimen, it will

certainly deceive someone wishing to identify a swimming marine mammal during, for example, a whale-watching journey.

Marine Mammals of India is produced soft-cover; it is written in a quite straightforward style, and the information is generally well laid out. The illustrations are poor, however, especially the drawings of dolphins; neither body shapes nor colouration are accurate, undoubtedly reflecting lack of familiarity of the author with the animals depicted. The figures are not included on the same page as the species descriptions. They are located in a series of plates at the end of the book—probably for the purpose of reducing printing costs. The order in which the species illustrations are presented is different from that followed in the text and, although at a first glance they appear to be grouped by morphological similarity (i.e., species with beak or of comparable size), the rationale is not clear; for example, killer whales are located far away from the other Delphinidae and between the sperm whale and the dugong.

At the end of the volume, there are indices to common, local, and scientific names, but there is no index to subject and geographical names. The latter is a particular flaw; India is an enormous state, extending through a considerable latitudinal range along two well-differentiated seafronts. Moreover, its coastline contains numerous islands and semi-enclosed water masses, all of which combine to produce substantial regional variation in the marine mammal fauna. Anyone wishing to learn which species are present in a given geographical area would have to go through a cumbersome reading of the distribution or habitat sections of every species to satisfy his need. This is aggravated by the absence of maps of distribution in the entries devoted to each species. Such maps, a geographical index, or a chapter on local distribution; elimination of the unnecessary detailed listing of records; and more accurate illustrations would certainly be worthy improvements if a second edition of the book is produced. In its current form, the book is a valuable, though somewhat imperfect, addition to the regional bibliography on marine mammals. It is valuable as an introductory text or as an identification guide; however, the scholar or the serious amateur will still be in need of a more elaborated book.

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Literature Cited

- Kumaran, P. (2002). Marine mammal research in India: A review and critique of the methods. *Current Science*, 83(10), 1210-1220.