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book review

Census of marine life

Life in the World's Oceans: Diversity, Distribution and Abundance, ed. by Alasdair D. McIntyre
Wiley-Blackwell, October 2010, 384 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4051-9297-2

Price: £120 / € 144 (Hardcover)

<http://www.wiley.com/wiley-blackwell>

This is a book about which superlatives are needed. It contains 17 chapters which summarise results to date in the Census of Marine Life, which as a bald statement perhaps under-emphasises the important point that these chapters are invaluable reviews of knowledge about a very large programme and about widely different aspects of the ocean's life. This particular programme has been in progress for a decade at least, depending on which species groups are referred to, but which started mostly in the early 1990s following increasing concerns about loss of diversity in the oceans of the world.

The book itself is beautifully produced and is in colour throughout, containing innumerable clear maps, which is especially important for such a subject. The graphics for the volume have added much to its attractiveness, value and to its ability to convey biogeographic and biodiversity information to a very wide readership. This, of course, is the whole point of a summary or of a review, especially a collected volume of such reviews, but with printing costs of colour such effective use is too commonly sacrificed by the use of much less clear and less communicative black and white images. It seems clear that if books are to retain a place in a pdf world, then colour in such volumes is essential, and when a collection of highly illustrated articles like this is included in one volume, its success is surely assured. The publishers too are to be complimented in this case.

The chapters start with an introduction by Fred Grassle, one of the pioneers of marine biodiversity studies, followed by 17 chapters (by a total of about 140 authors) which systematically review different aspects of marine biodiversity, by region and by both pelagic and benthic habitat, including that of the very deep ocean. Without listing all the chapters, the different parts are collected into several parts: Oceans Past, Oceans Present – Geo-

graphic Realms, Oceans Present – Global Distributions, Oceans Present – Animal Movements, Oceans Future and, finally, Using the Data. None of the component chapters slip from providing very useful, well-summarised and informative information on themes connected with oceanic diversity. They also manage to include large numbers of photographs illustrating the wide range of biodiversity that exists. Perhaps microbial diversity is under-represented, microbes contributing as they do some 90% of oceanic biomass. However, this is a subject whose literature I'm sure will explode in the next decade as we humans realise more and more that, whatever the interest, appeal and observability of macro life are to us, macro-species are just one rather small offshoot of Earth's life as it has existed over billions of years.

This volume is of great value to those of us whose research has been necessarily focussed on particular aspects so that we feel we are losing the battle to keep abreast of all these innumerable findings in so many other related marine biology disciplines. This book is, quite simply, very good. It is a pity it is £120 which means it is mostly going to be confined to libraries, rather than be used in countless private homes and office shelves, especially of younger researchers. It will be a benchmark for several years.

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