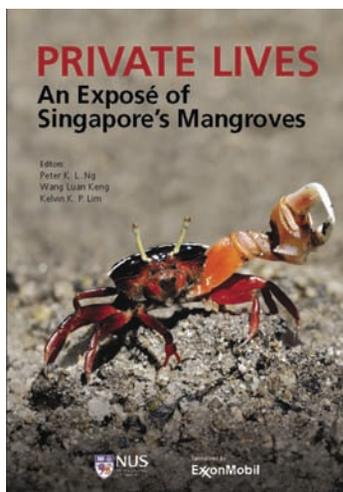


BOOK REVIEW



Private Lives: An Exposé of Singapore's Mangroves. Peter K. L. Ng, Wang Luan Keng, Kelvin K. P. Lim, 2008. The Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research, Singapore, 249 pages. ISBN: 978-981-05-8717-8.

This book is the second volume in a new series called "Private Lives", edited by the Raffles Museum of Biodiversity Research. In this series

the different biotopes of the coastline of Singapore Island and adjacent regions are treated simply and explicatively, destined for the grand public but also for scientists. The subject of the first volume were the sandy and rocky seashores, and this volume is about the mangroves, a much more specialized biotope. The books of this series do not give scholarly information on fauna and flora in form of "dry" descriptions with the corresponding pictures but take all kind of interesting facts "from the life" (as the title promises) and tell stories. And about mangroves there are many stories to tell. However, the mangrove biotopes are very difficult in access; the bottom is often soft mud, the roots block the way and serve as barricades, the air is very hot, damp and humid, and the mosquitoes are stinging. So, the life out there cannot be observed "like that" and is really "private". The merit of this book is to bring that mangrove life to light and to tell us about it in an easily readable and understandable text, with numerous excellent photos of plants, live animals and biotope situations, often close-up photos never seen before in that manner.

Singapore is situated within the "golden triangle of biodiversity" in the centre of the Indo-Pacific realm, together with Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, that means the species diversity is extremely high, and the mangroves make no exception, they are among the most species rich mangrove communities on the planet, in number of mangrove trees, associated plants and animal species. All aspects of mangrove life are covered in the book, from tiny algae to the huge mangrove trees and from small invertebrates to birds and mammals at the end of the food chain.

The book is divided into chapters, but these are by no means systematic, although there is a certain order but this is more ecological; the chapters have unusual titles that make the reader curious to discover what is behind, and he will not be disappointed.

The book is not written by one author. Many contributors, each with his own speciality, share their knowledge with the reader, and that makes the book still more valuable.

It starts with the mangrove plants and all aspects of their biology, follow chapters on the mangrove lobster community and the very rich life in the canopy of the mangrove forest. Another chapter is on the intertidal zone in front of the mangrove trees, and a special chapter treats the mud-dwelling animals, mostly molluscs and crustaceans, and shows that mud is not at all a desert but a rich environment. The next chapter contains the fish fauna, and the migrating birds which make their stop-overs in the mangrove biotopes to take profit from the rich offer of food are not forgotten. Do you know what a "top dog" is (by the way we are also one!)? This is also the title of another chapter in which the feeding strategies of the big predators in the mangrove biotopes are explained. The influence of men to the mangrove biotopes in Singapore is illustrated in the last part of the book, among others explaining what people take from the mangroves for food, health etc., the last news of scientific research on the mangrove biotopes with interesting new species recently described, and a vivid plea for protection of the last remaining mangrove biotopes, which is most important because 95% of the original mangrove covering of Singapore Island are now gone.

There are many strange or curious things in the mangroves, and the book is full of small histories and surprising facts. Can you imagine a frog that lives in salty sea water? Or a fish that walks on land and watches at you with twinkling eyes? Or a bivalve that climbs on trees up to the leaves? Or that there are lobsters that even build some sort of "skyscraper"-like condominiums? And a fish that uses its mouth as a water pistol to catch prey? All that exists in the mangroves, and it is nicely explained in the book, accompanied by superb photos. There are many other strange facts accumulated, e.g. on the propagation of the mangrove trees, on the birds living around and in them, on the molluscs living on and underneath them, on the worms, the reptiles, the fishes and especially the crustaceans which are a speciality of many of my colleagues in the Raffles Museum.

Book Review

The book is said to have a “Singapore-centric approach” as is expressed in the Prologue. But that is an understatement, the book has no restriction at all and with the many general explanations, it is extremely interesting and useful for all naturalists, especially those interested in tropical biotopes, animals and plants. So the book should be much more widely diffused as initially thought and find readers not only in Singapore and the neighbouring countries.

This is one of the best popular books on mangroves I have ever seen. I will not say more now. I was fascinated when

I read it, and I recommend it warmly. Go into a bookshop and have a look. And enjoy reading!

Rudo von Cosel

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