

Book Review

The Variety of Life. A survey and celebration of all creatures that have ever lived

by Colin Tudge

Pp. xvi + 684, including numerous line drawings

2000, ISBN 0198503113, hardback £35.00

Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK

For some, this delightfully and authoritatively produced work falls between two stools in that it is neither a textbook nor a coffee-table piece. Although it may serve as an introductory text for students, it lacks the detail demanded of most college and university courses today. However, the content and presentation will undoubtedly whet the appetite; hopefully this and the useful bibliography (16 pages) will provide the impetus for students to develop an interest in studying whole organisms, an important element of biology played down in the present-day syllabus which is devoted for the most part to molecular and biochemical aspects of the subject.

In introductory chapters (90 pages), Colin Tudge provides us with an evocation of whole organism biology through his treatment of biodiversity ("so many goodly creatures"), of systematics and taxonomy ("a search for order"), of evolution, and of the relevance of other disciplines. However, the bulk of the book (516 pages) is devoted to a review of the biota under the headings Bacteria and Archaea (20 pages), Fungi (21 pages), Animalia (365 pages) and Plantae (60 pages); as one can see from this breakdown, the slant of the book is clearly zoological.

Those interested in symbiosis will be disappointed in its treatment: mutualism is defined as "a special form of symbiosis" (p. 138 and p. 161), lichens ("lichenous relationship") are given two paragraphs (p. 161 and p. 170) and mycorrhizae three (p. 161 and p. 171), while *Symbiodinium* is given one sentence (p. 228)! Rather curiously the only species used to exemplify lichens on the kingdom fungi tree (p. 169) is *Omphalina ericetorum*. Perhaps I am attaching too much importance to my own interests?

Despite these misgivings regarding its instructional role and specific contents, this book has much to commend it. The text abounds with line drawings of the highest quality, superbly portraying animals (and to a lesser extent plants) and the text is thought-provoking and often innovative in its approach. The environmental issues explored in the last section of the book, "Saving what is left", should be brought to the attention of a wide readership, particularly in respect of phylogeny and conservation, human expansion and sustainability. Both author and publishers are to be congratulated on this scholarly and elegantly produced work which represents excellent value in hardback.

M.R.D. Seaward