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## Oceans: An Illustrated Reference

By Dorrik Stow, University of Chicago Press, 2006, 256 pages, ISBN 0226776646, Hardcover, \$55 US

REVIEW BY TOM GARRISON

One test of a book is to leave it on your desk for a time and see what happens when somebody picks it up. In the case of Dorrik Stow's *Oceans, an Illustrated Reference*, curious examiners wanted to know if it was a textbook, a cyclopedic reference, or a coffee table book.

The answer depends on who's asking the question. For me, a teaching professor and textbook writer, leafing through this beautiful book for the first time triggered emotions of envy—the clear and easily understood graphics and excellent image selection sent me running for more post-it notes to mark pages from which I could learn better presentation techniques. For my family, the effective illustration program and information on marine animals generated the most interest. For my office partner, a marine geologist, the organization of the book and the currency and clarity of the writing were the most attractive points.

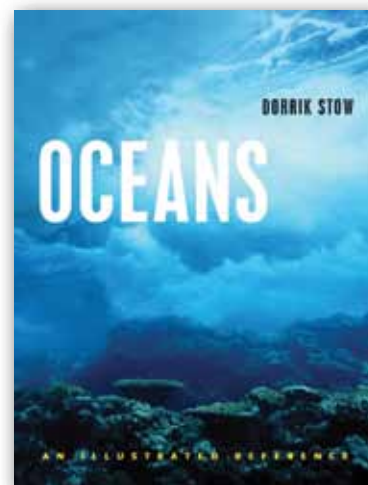
So here is a very rare book: a skillfully written, current, and unusually attractive presentation of ocean science that does not talk down to the audience, that unapologetically uses genus names and the SI system of measurements, and that maintains a balance between the living and non-living aspects of the ocean world.

Stow has divided the work into two

major parts: Ocean Systems and Ocean Life. Following an effective preface by Charles Kennel, former director of Scripps Institution of Oceanography, the author launches these large subjects with a series of short essays. One of these, “The Lure of the Sea,” effectively makes the point that the ocean did not prevent the spread of humanity—by the time the European explorers set out to “discover” the world, virtually every spot capable of supporting stable human populations was doing so. In the next essay, “Great Voyages of Discovery,” we inevitably hear about Columbus, but we also find information on the astonishing voyages of Admiral Zheng He and the Ming treasure ships.

The systems approach the author takes in the book's two primary sections is an ideal way to explain the complex interaction of sea, land, and atmosphere. Process and relationships are emphasized. The discussion of plate tectonics in Chapter 1 is especially effective, and the illustrations are models of clarity. The photo of Iceland's Thingvillir region is the best I've seen. Chapter 5 in this section, “Hidden Riches of the Ocean,” is superb in its balanced coverage of actual and potential marine energy sources. A chapter containing data for each major ocean basin with clear, well-drawn maps ends this section.

Refreshingly, a solid evolutionary approach underlies the second major section, “Ocean Life.” Beginning with an exposition of theories on the origin of life, the author moves through marine



biology with his now familiar systems integration approach. Again, illustrations and graphics effectively emphasize the points being made.

Dorrik Stow is Professor of Ocean and Earth Science at Southampton Oceanography Center. In addition to his own synthesis, he has integrated contributions from experts in interlocking fields to produce a book that accomplishes the near-impossible: It could be used as a text (it has a useful glossary and index); it could grace anyone's coffee table (the cover photo demands one pick up the book); it could sit happily on a reference shelf (where its charts and tables would be in considerable demand).

Is this book perfect? Not quite. My one quibble is with the title. With such a thorough systems approach, I wish the author had titled the book: “The Ocean...” There is, after all, only one.

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