

Best, P.B.: Whales and Dolphins of the Southern African Subregion (illustrated by O.A. Folkens). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, Cape Town (2007). XIII & 338pp., Numerous Colour Drawings, Photos and Maps, Hardback, Brit. £100, US\$240, ISBN: 978-0-521-89710-5

This is a beautifully produced and highly informative volume that deals with whales, dolphins and one species of porpoises from the south-eastern Atlantic and the south-western Indian Oceans, as well as from the ocean south of the African continent and down to Antarctica. The diversity of cetacean species in the waters around southern Africa is documented by nine chapters on Mysticeti and 42 on Odontoceti.

After a foreword and short introductory chapters, a colour map informs about geographical features, including place names of larger cities as well as promontories and islands. I.J. Ansorge and J.R.E. Lutjeharms, both from the Department of Oceanography of the University of Cape Town, give a short but very interesting and well-illustrated account on “The cetacean environment off Southern Africa”. The reader is informed about the characteristics of the waters surrounding the continent. Not only in the text, but also with three colour maps, currents, eddies, the Subtropical Convergence and the Antarctic Front are described. W.F. Perrin from the National Marine Fisheries Service in La Jolla, California, gives a short account of the relationships between species in the Atlantic and Indian Oceans. After a list informing about the classification of living Cetacea, followed by an illustrated key to the cetaceans of the subregion and brief information about characteristics of the cetacean skulls, the species accounts fill 260 pages.

Each chapter is presented in a standardized form: it begins with the English and scientific names, a beautifully painted colour illustration of the whole animal (but unfortunately no scales on linear expansions of species are given!), followed by an introductory text of variable length. Then the general appearance of the considered species is described in detail, followed by a discussion of its geographical distribution and migrations, which is

illustrated by a colour map. External commensals and parasites are dealt with, followed by a section on food and feeding behaviour. In spite of the difficulties to obtain precise data, thorough and sometimes even detailed accounts on reproduction and growth are given. Behaviour and vocalisations are dealt with and information on the conservation status of the species is presented. At the end of each species account, a list of references can be found. In addition to the already mentioned painted illustration of the whole animal – in some cases presenting aspects from different sides – impressive colour photos of the animals, often in their natural habitat, as well as detailed photos of the total skull and its specific differentiation present additional information on the various species. In these chapters, one can find “boxes” with data on the length/weight relationship of the respective species as well as information on skeletal data. The present reviewer very much appreciates another type of “boxes” that can be found in chapters on some of the species. Here, information on aspects of general cetology or interesting details that are relevant to certain species is given. To obtain an impression of a few of the interesting aspects presented in these boxes here are three randomly selected titles: “Discovery marking” gives information on whale studies with the help of tags implanted into the living animal and – hopefully – found later in the hunted or stranded body. Another interesting aspect are “Mass strandings” or “Dolphins, porpoises – what’s the difference?” (spade-shaped teeth can be found in the harbour porpoise and peg-like teeth in dolphins).

The impressive amount of consulted literature is presented in a bibliographical list comprising 36 pages. The sources of illustrations are acknowledged on three pages and the book is concluded by a glossary of four pages and a two-page index.

Peter Langer
Giessen, Germany

Peter.Langer@anatomie.med.uni-giessen.de