

BOOK REVIEW

David, Mabi, Agnes C. de Jesus and Julie F. Barcelona. 2011. *Rafflesia* of the Philippines: A Story of Adventure, Appetite, and Affinity. Energy Development Corporation, Pasig City. 180 pages, hardback. ISBN 978-971-91806-5-4. Price unknown, for more information – pubrels@energy.com.ph, www.energy.com.ph

It does not take a botanist to marvel at the striking beauty and magnificence of the world's largest blooms as they hold court in the tropical rainforests of Southeast Asia. Many aristocratic circles in Europe have celebrated the mystique of these exotic botanical oddities for more than two centuries. European explorers coming home from the colonies in the Far East have related tales detailing enchanted encounters with these bizarre floral giants.

However, the systematic study of the great diversity of these parasitic flowers, named after the intrepid English explorer, visionary and founder of Singapore, Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles, was only recently conceived with the pioneering comprehensive taxonomic treatment of the Rafflesiaceae by Meijer (1997). Another extensive treatment of all known species worldwide but with a more aesthetic twist was published by Nais (2001). The volume under review therefore comes out as special and unique as it strikes a balance between botanical science and environmental journalism.

Laying one's hands on a copy of this giant volume (285 x 285 mm) face to face with its flame red cover emblazoned with a beautiful watercolor rendition of the Philippine endemic species *Rafflesia speciosa* Barcelona & Fernando gives one a clue into what awaits the readers of this book. The whole book treats the broad topic of Philippine *Rafflesia* following the themes of Adventure, Appetite and Affinity as bannered in the book subtitle. The first theme details the pioneering adventures of early botanical collectors in the East Indies as among the first to introduce *Rafflesia* to the rest of the world, including snippets of vivid narratives describing exploration activities in the Philippines starting from the Malaspina expedition in 1792. A chapter continues the theme of adventure by documenting the phenomena of gigantism and parasitism within the plant world zeroing on the bizarre biology of *Rafflesia*.

The second theme of Appetite dwells on the carnivorous nature of *Rafflesia* against the cycle of life and death in a seemingly paradoxical tone of death begetting life. The human "appetite" for finding *Rafflesia* in Philippine forests is highlighted by the many first-person stories and photos shared by botanists who have combed through the four corners of the archipelago in search of these enigmatic blooms often with productive results and new discoveries.

The last theme of Affinity explores some human links and impacts on *Rafflesia*, its special biology and fragile conservation status. Communities have started to identify with *Rafflesia* as a source of pride as in the case of the town of Sibalom, Antique where an annual local *Rafflesia*-themed festival is held. The link between science and society is highlighted with the personal thoughts of some field biologists who granted interviews for this book, foremost of whom was the late Leonardo L. Co who was fatally wounded during one of his botanical forays shortly before the release of this book. The book concludes with wishful and calculated prospects for the saving of species and habitats, how scientists and local companies can work hand in hand under the spirit of corporate social responsibility; this book under review is one such collaborative output of this special relationship.

Unlike most coffee table books which are awash with stunning photography alone, this volume also serves to educate and inform. The authors have done Philippine botany a great service by compiling and reprinting previously published accounts of the taxonomy, ecology and conservation status of local *Rafflesia* species. This certainly puts this volume above the rest! A dichotomous key to the ten Philippine species of *Rafflesia* thus far recorded in 2011 precedes comprehensive species treatments each of which is accompanied with watercolor drawings done by Yasmin Ong. A useful map of the Philippines goes with each species treatment to show known extant and extinct local populations. Key diagnostic features easy to understand even to amateurs are summarized for each species, including etymological notes, synonymies, ecological, phytogeographical, conservation and taxonomic notes. Reading through these treatments is the next best thing to examining these flowers up close, saving the readers potential physical and olfactory stress. Immediately, the reader is transported back in time and into the heart of field botanical adventure!

One of the most valuable sections of this book is the bibliography which represents practically all known works on Philippine *Rafflesia*. This should be consulted by the serious student or reader who wants to learn more. The bibliography reads like a Who's Who of contemporary Philippine botany. The long list of acknowledgments and photography credits attests to the extensively collaborative and multidisciplinary nature of this book. But readers should be warned that this book is not the final word of the *Rafflesia* saga for the boiling botanical cauldron is still active to this day as exemplified for example by the recent work of Pelsner et al. (2013).

The troika of M. David, A.C. de Jesus and J.F. Barcelona deserves the collective gratitude of the Filipino people, particularly the Filipino botanical community, for producing this seminal and inspiring work. As F.R. Lopez and R.B. Tantoco said in the Foreword to the book, this work is "a tribute to our hardworking, brilliant, but often overlooked Filipino scientists." This volume bears witness to the few occasions when the corporate world sees through the valiant efforts and outputs of unsung botanists and into the lens of

the scientific world. In this case, corporate social responsibility in tandem with the professional dedication and expertise of many Filipino botanists breathed a new lease of life, or even granted an extension of life to the rapidly dwindling, highly threatened and once poorly appreciated species of *Rafflesia* which are truly a part of the Filipino natural heritage. This volume therefore belongs to every school, municipal and home library in the Philippines, if only to instill national pride for one of the most fascinating elements of Philippine biodiversity.

LITERATURE CITED

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