

Preface

When I began this book, I already knew that I was attempting the impossible. The Earth's biological diversity is much too vast a subject for any one person to really grasp. Yet I could see that there is the urgent need for a textbook which is both accessible enough, and rigorous enough, to provide a start for anyone interested in the serious study of biodiversity.

So far, the published literature on this subject has either been too dense and inaccessible, or much too cursory and simple, for students starting out in research or in conservation management. This book is intended to provide a bridge, between the simple and the complex.

The task of pulling so much information together and putting it into a straightforward form has involved more effort than I ever thought I was capable of. Even so, it has been an immensely rewarding experience, opening up and clarifying many areas of knowledge for me. This is knowledge which I now hope can be passed on to others. I am aware that there are gaps, and inevitably specialists will find inaccuracies somewhere in this book. Yet, at a time when we are on the brink of losing so much, I cannot allow fear of nit-picking to prevent me from explaining the story and the mysteries of biological diversity, to as many people as will listen.

This book has greatly benefited from comments by my friends and colleagues. Among them, Ellen Thomas, James Steele, Michael Rampino, Matt Huber, and David Currie gave particularly thorough and helpful reviews of chapters. I would also like to thank all those who have provided photographs for this book: I have acknowledged each of them in turn in the figure captions. Special thanks to Mark June-Wells for the butterfly photos, and Maile Nielle for the fynbos photos, on the front cover of the book. And in particular, my wife and best friend Mei Ling Lee has been a wonderful source of support and inspiration for me throughout.

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