

Preface

Let me say from the outset that this book will challenge much of the conventional wisdom regarding the biology of caves. There are several reasons for that. As the reader will perceive throughout the text, biospeleology has tremendous potential to inform many aspects of modern biology, yet this area of knowledge remains largely anchored in non-neo-Darwinian views of the natural world in both its approaches and its jargon. Therefore the ideas I present here are likely to create controversy in some quarters, but that is one of the approaches of science: to generate discussions that hopefully will illuminate many aspects of the workings of nature.

The reader should not expect an attempt to condense everything known about cave biology; this book is not written with an encyclopedic mindset. What this book is all about is a critical examination of our current knowledge and ideas regarding cave biology, with an emphasis on the areas of evolution, ecology, and conservation. To that end I have selected material for the discussion that is central to those topics while taking a critical thinking approach to what is considered conventional wisdom in this subject.

The book begins with a historical analysis of ideas that have influenced biospeleology and that have been generated by researchers working in that area. Thus the aim of Chapter 1 is to give the historical and philosophical background to why I think cave biology has yet to reach its full potential.

Chapter 2 deals with the biodiversity of hypogean organisms (both cave and phreatic). This chapter has three main objectives: (1) to show the enormous diversity of cave organisms, which goes well beyond the ones that have been categorized by many authors as 'true cavernicoles'; (2) to update the reader on the progress that has been made in the study of those groups; and (3) to highlight some of the most interesting biological phenomena among the hypogean biodiversity that will be discussed later in the book.

Chapter 3 deals with evolutionary phenomena in caves, from cave colonization to phenotypic and genotypic changes. Here, I advance ideas that, although well known in mainstream biology, have been, in my opinion, overlooked by many practitioners of biospeleology.

Chapter 4 has to do with the ecology of caves. My approach to this topic also aims to integrate concepts and knowledge from diverse biological viewpoints. I do not devote much space to aspects of the physical environment (autoecology) unless they are directly related to the discussion at hand. For that, the reader should refer him/herself to some of the literature cited in the book. Therefore the scope of the book is in the area of ecology defined as, "the biology of ecosystems" (*sensu* Margalef 1974). Because there have been so few modern ecological studies carried out in caves, a great deal of the discussion in this chapter is theoretical in nature while trying to point out the major areas in which we need more research.

Chapter 5 deals with conservation of the cave environment and its biota. Here, I present an integrated approach to the issue by using multiple examples from around the world with the underlying message that caves are both unique and fragile natural laboratories whose biota is being rapidly modified by humans.

I finish the book with an epilogue in which I try to point out some of the most urgent questions I think we should address in order to attain a better and more complete understanding of caves as ecosystems.

I have also added an appendix with a glossary of terms frequently employed in biospeleology. The reader not familiar with the biospeleology literature will find that cave biologists have developed a vocabulary that is hard to understand; in many ways, this reflects the typological and epistemological confusion that dominates biospeleology.

I hope you will enjoy the book. I certainly enjoyed researching for it and putting together the ideas presented here.