



The variety of life

By Colin Tudge

Oxford University Press, 2000

Review by Per Sundberg

There are around 1.7 million species known to science, although nobody knows for sure. Everybody agrees, however, that it is a gross underestimate and some biologists estimate that the number of living species is probably nearer 8 millions. Other feel that the number is perhaps nearer 100 million. Our awareness of, and interest in, this immense diversity has increased over recent years which is mirrored by a growing number of books and articles on the subject.

Colin Tudge contribute to this trend by his "The variety of life" where he takes on the task to give an overview of all principal groups of organisms. The author starts by giving some general background for the systematics and classification of biological organisms. I very much sympathize with this approach, but the author is not a practising systematist and some of his views would not stand undisputed in another context. After this introduction follows the main core of the text which is a straightforward account of animal and plant diversity. Tudge starts by the bacteria, then goes through the animal kingdom in the traditional way by starting the "lower" animals and ending with the vertebrates (which, also traditionally, takes an disproportionate large account) before ending the book with the plants. However good the intention is to cover the entire organismal realm, this approach is clearly a weakness of the book. The book's intention and readership is a bit unclear – something the author himself acknowledges in the first chapter. It works well when it comes to get a general picture of biodiversity, but the line drawings feels a bit outdated when thinking of all beautiful illustrations there are around. The author describes how his interest for the biological diversity arose in school and how he wanted to admire, and get to know what was out there. I think that the author should have taken another approach when it comes to illustrating the biodiversity if he wants to inspire people and to get them equally thrilled about biodiversity. I am not also sure who is going to buy this book. Professional biologists would presumably seek the same information in other places and the layperson would probably like something better illustrated. The book may earn its place in a school library, but I fear that students nowadays rather turn to the web for information as their first choice. And probably find nicer illustrations of the plants and animals they are interested in, and more recent updated information.

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