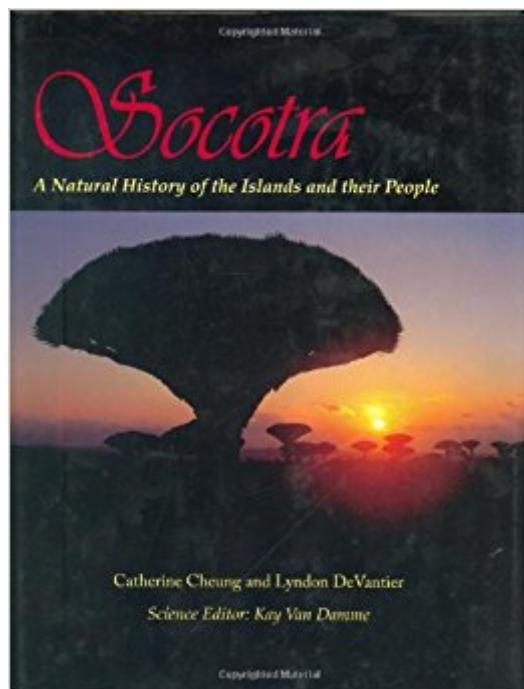


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Socotra: A Natural History Of The Islands And Their People



Synopsis

This richly illustrated book provides the first comprehensive review of the natural history of these islands. The islands became a UNESCO Man and Biosphere Reserve in 2003 and have been nominated as a World Heritage site. While documenting Socotra's geology, biodiversity, ecology, human history and culture, the book also highlights aspects of the islands' biogeography, evolution, and conservation. Thoroughly researched, with contributions from numerous international and local specialists, the book is packed with up-to-date scientific, historic and cultural information. 300 color photos, 10 maps.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Authors Catherine Cheung and Lyndon DeVantier lived on Socotra for three years during the late 1990s. The two marine ecologists share a broad interest in natural and cultural history, and in communicating science and conservation to the public. Science editor Kay Van Damme, hydrobiologist at Ghent University in Belgium, has extensively explored the freshwater and cave ecosystems of Socotra, and is passionate about all aspects of the islands' present and past.

In one word, irreplaceable. Comprehensive and scholarly summary of the history, ecology and culture of a unique place. Beautifully illustrated and written in a very approachable way.

There is nothing out there like this book. Nothing even comes close. If you're interested in the island of Suqutra, you basically must have this book. Live on the streets. Eat only rice. Sell your children.

But buy this book. "Natural History" contains everything you could possibly want to know about the islands and their people- including that they aren't one island, but actually six, three of which are inhabited. The book goes into great detail on the history, the customs, the flora and fauna, marine life, geology, and the environmental impact and future of Suqutra. Cheung and DeVantier have taken a century and a half of research, countless articles and books, and their own personal experience to present a beautifully photographed and intricate portrayal. Here you can learn about the poisonous animals (and what the possibility is of a giant poisonous snake); how to politely visit a Suqutri home and eat; why the Suqutri marine ecology is so unique; when the island was Christian; and how frankincense and ambergris are formed by battle between giant monsters and from special trees. Perhaps the only thing missing is a more detailed analysis of the centrality of folk Islam in the society, which is only alluded to at times- but that can be found in the ethnography Island of the Phoenix. Truthfully, this book is a bargain- it should be selling at about three times the price, for no other book comes close to matching it. Some have a thirst for Suqutra and want to learn more about it by reading this book. There may be some reading this review who've never heard of the place. Go buy the book to find out. This is the oldest isolated continental land in the world. Because of this, and fierce winter storms six months of the year with unique alternating encircling currents, the island's biology is unique and has a rate of endemic species comparable for it's size to Hawaii or the Galapagos. Dragon's Blood Trees and actual Cucumber trees (trees grown to the size of cucumbers) are unique to this island, as are the inaptly named Persian Violets (now available from florists). But unlike those other islands of uniqueness, Suqutra is not only continental crust, but also has had an indigenous population of humans for over two millennia. These people have been largely culturally and linguistically isolated as well over that time, and have had specific impacts on their small land, as well as learning valuable environmental tools to care for the ecology and continue to survive. In it's second to last chapter "Natural History" takes a look at these environmental issues, in a series of studies so engaging they read like short stories. They tell of modern attempts at ecological protection, with successes and failures. But the studies are always encouraging, for even in failures there is at least the recognition of the problem, and what needs to continue to be protected. Due to the public's lack of awareness of Suqutra, and the long history of ecological concern by the islanders, there is time to actively work to identify unique animals and ecology of the islands and protect them before there is great loss, as has occurred in Hawaii. As such, many like the authors are working towards sustainable development and technological application on the islands, without removing natural culture or wildlife, to the extent that this is possible. I perhaps appreciated most of all the final chapter. Many may have read the recent New

York Times article on Suqutra, and are considering it as a pleasing new adventure, and out of the way destination. The final chapter of "Natural History" warns against this. While ecotourism is growing on the island, it is having a greater negative impact on the animals and plants of Suqutra. Suqutra is very hot, with fierce winds, a high chance of contracting malaria, strange customs (for Westerners), dangerous biting insects, extremely limited hospital care and doctors, and water too limited to allow regular bathing. If you're going to go, the authors wish to communicate that it's not for a lark or the faint of heart, and please respect the people and the land, so as to sustain it for future generations. Suqutra is a land of adventure, but the kind of adventure that is grueling and difficult, that involves emotional death to self in changing cultural practices, potentially taking lives and causing a lifetime of injury.

This book is definitively the best publication on Socotra currently available. Socotra is a natural wonder, and so far very few people got the lucky chance to visit the island. As a consequence, available data are scarce. Readers will find useful and comprehensive informations about all aspects of the island natural and human environment. Geology, botany, terrestrial as well as marine zoology, history and ethnography, all these topics and more have been described in great detail. Last but not least, the editorial quality of the book is very high and a good number of very nice pictures and diagrams can be found.

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