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Book reviews

Fish and Fisheries of Tropical Estuaries (Fish and Fisheries Series 22, Series Editor T.J. Pitcher)

Stephen J.M. Blaber

Chapman & Hall, London etc., 1997

ISBN 0-412-78500-5, £69.00

Hard cover, acid-free paper, pp. xiv + 367, 28 tables, 74 figures

Taxonomic, geographic and subject indexes, extensive reference list

I have always been amazed by the courage of those who select estuaries as their area of research. Whatever the definition of estuaries – and such definition is an art form itself – working on water bodies lodged between the marine and the freshwater worlds is bound to be a risky affair: marine biologists and limnologists tend to be only marginally interested, forcing those courageous souls working on estuaries to write mainly for each other (they even have their own journals, one of them aptly called *Estuaries*). Moreover – and this is more serious – many of the largest estuarine systems are tropical: the Amazon, Congo, Ganges, Mekong and Zambezi drain huge areas of South America, Africa and Asia. The tropical location of many of the large estuaries, and of the coastal lagoons, estuarine lakes and ‘estuarinized’ shelves which Blaber wisely decided also to cover in his book, means that work on these systems will be affected by the numerous and well-documented constraints to research in the tropics, usually too strong to be fully compensated for by the determination of those who nevertheless manage to produce.

Considering all this, I view the balance in Blaber’s coverage of major tropical estuaries as its chief asset. Obviously, this book cannot deny its South African origins: the coast of Kwazulu-Natal is where Blaber, now in Australia, did most of his early work, and this inevitably shows.

What also shows, however, and it makes this book a pleasure to read, is the explicitness of Blaber’s circumtropical coverage, achieved by ‘stratified sampling’ of the systems he uses as key examples or case studies. Thus, for open estuaries he discusses four systems in the Americas (Orinoco, Amazon, Tortuguero, Apalachicola), three in Africa (Morrumbene, Niger, Sierra Leone), and 10 in South/Southeast Asia and Oceania (Ganges, Mahakam, Lupar, Matang, Ranong, Fly, Solomon Island, Embley, Norman, Alligator Creek), and similarly for coastal lakes. Another major structuring element of Blaber’s book is – perhaps predictably – the fishes inhabiting estuaries, here treated in terms of their diversity and adaptation to the physical factors shaping estuarine habitats (salinity, water movements, turbidity), particularly in terms of their trophic adaptations and reproduction, two topics with chapters of their own. A concise chapter on estuarine fisheries describes the wide diversity of methods by which these fishes are exploited and the management issues this exploitation raises. Blaber also addresses estuarine dependence – again, in a separate chapter – to discuss an issue that too many, perhaps unduly influenced by the abundant literature from the south-eastern USA, in which such dependence is established for most important coastal fish groups, take for granted in other areas of the world. Still, Blaber does conclude (p. 218) that

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“the *shallow* [his emphasis] estuarine waters found either in the sheltered waters of open estuaries or in the mangrove habitats of estuaries and estuarine coastal waters of the subtropics and tropics, are vital nursery grounds and important habitats for the feeding or reproduction of a number of species.” This gives particular poignancy to the last chapter, on human impacts, which documents some of the many destructive activities to which tropical estuaries are exposed throughout the world (garbage and effluent disposal, clearcutting of mangrove, urbanization, etc.), rarely countered by projects devoted to reforestation and pollution control, and other forms of mitigation.

Important features of this book are its successful blend of well-chosen and well-reproduced photos and of excellently (re-)drawn figures, an extremely rich bibliography, the indexes (taxonomic, geographic and subject) that spell the difference between a useful book and a useless tome, and an easy style that encourages reading (and which is not well illustrated by the convoluted quote above, more akin to my own style). And yes, I really would have bought *Fish and Fisheries of Tropical Estuaries*, had it not been for the free reviewer's copy. Indeed, it is likely somebody will snatch this copy, proving its indispensability. Voilà.

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