

S. Wolfart, *The Southern Tip of Africa*

David Philip, Claremont, 2006

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Refreshingly, this book does not focus on the Cape Peninsula, so often the subject of such coffee-table publications, but rather delves into the Agulhas Plain, an area which stretches from the De Hoop Nature Reserve in the east, to Hermanus in the west. The area, famous for its early human history, coastal diversity, and wetlands, boasts no less than 2 500 plant species, 300 of which are endemic to the area, as well as numerous rare species of bird and amphibious life. The author, Stephan Wolfart, now a professional photographer, but once an industrial designer, unsurprisingly provides all the photographs within the book, and contributes much of the text.

The book follows a geographical path across the Agulhas Plain from east to west and is broken down into short chapters which describe the significant features of each area along the way, be they flora or fauna. Interspersed between Wolfart's commentary and photographs are short sections authored by "experts" in their respective fields. These fields of interest relate directly to Wolfart's on-going narrative. For example, short sections are devoted to the black African oystercatcher (which can live up to 40 years), the "glory" of bulbous plants (the area is home to over 230 different species) and the Moravian mission at Elim.

Turning to the quality of the photography, one is struck by how Wolfart's love of the area clearly enriches his pictures. The photographs are generally of a very high standard, and were taken in all types of weather, rather than the cliché sunny blue skies. It is also pleasing to see that the publishers have not demanded a sunset shot on every other page. Wolfart's flower pictures, and macro shots in general, are excellent, and he clearly has an eye for the small details that often exist unseen around us.

The book, however, is not without its problems, the most serious of which is the captioning that appears under photographs of people throughout the book. Every

“white” person who appears in the book is specifically named, while no “non-whites” are named at all. This anachronistic and offensive approach is worsened by the nature of the captions that appear under pictures of “non-white” residents of the area. Captions include, for example, “a happy smile at Kassiesbaai”, and “a happy bunch during the grape harvest”. Aside from their patronising nature, these captions also speak to a wider tendency throughout the book to romanticise the lives of “non-white” people who live within the Agulhas Plain. While Wolfart notes the relative poverty of some people within the area, the lives of fisher people, thatchers and those who harvest flowers and grapes are romanticised to reproduce the mythology of the rural idyll and joyful poverty.

While the “expert” sections of the book are often interesting, they are too brief. The only historian to contribute to the book is tasked with providing an overview of the mission station at Elim. Other than noting the date of the town’s establishment and its relative isolation, this section is almost entirely devoted to Elim’s architecture and its Easter religious festivals. Nothing is offered in the way of an account of the origins and the development of the community at Elim itself. In addition, there is some repetition between sections written by these “experts” and Wolfart himself, particularly regarding protea species within the area.

Another problem is the clearly unintended and uncritical juxtaposition of a section written by a marine biologist who describes how misunderstood great white sharks are and how they need to be better protected, with images of sharks being baited for shark cage diving off the coast.

Lastly, the panoramic images within the book that are made up of images “stitched” together, are generally quite poor. A high degree of skill is needed to successfully and convincingly “stitch” such images together; sadly, the “stitched” panoramics within this book are not well executed, with sections of “stitching” being clearly visible.

Despite these shortcomings, the book does expose (however unintentionally) a number of interesting ironies regarding nature conservation. While Wolfart notes the damage that alien invasive plants, such as Australian proteas and wattle trees are doing to the environment within the Agulhas Plain, it is the highly successful invasive Mediterranean mussel which is mostly responsible for the increase in numbers of the threatened black African oystercatcher.

It is clear from Wolfart’s commentary that those areas within the Agulhas Plain that are at their most pristine environmentally are those which are owned and controlled by Denel (the arms manufacturer) and Eskom (the national electricity supplier). Denel owns a 27 000 hectare area which borders on the De Hoop Nature Reserve. The area is entirely unfenced internally and is inaccessible to the public, ironically providing somewhat of an oasis for indigenous life to flourish. Eskom owns the Hagelkraal farm in the southern Overberg, which is home to no less than six endemic plant species and two of the rarest frogs on the African continent. Wolfart notes that Eskom has worked hard to keep the area clear of alien infestation. Alarmingly, it appears to have done so to enable it to create a “buffer-zone” for a planned nuclear power station.

Book reviews

Overall, this book falls between two stalls. It is not sure if it is a “light” coffee-table book full of wonderful images, or a serious attempt to offer a compelling and intellectual narrative about this area of South Africa. As it stands, it does neither, and sits uncomfortably between the two. Lastly, both the author and David Philip should be ashamed of the racist captioning throughout the book which makes it very hard to recommend.

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