

Realm of the Pygmy Seahorse

Reviewed by Anne Owen

Those of us who were lucky enough to be included on the distribution list of Constantinos' frequent e-mail 'newsletters' sent from Kungkungan Bay Resort while he was photographing for his book will feel that we have been waiting a very long time to see the final product - 'Realm of the Pygmy Seahorse'.

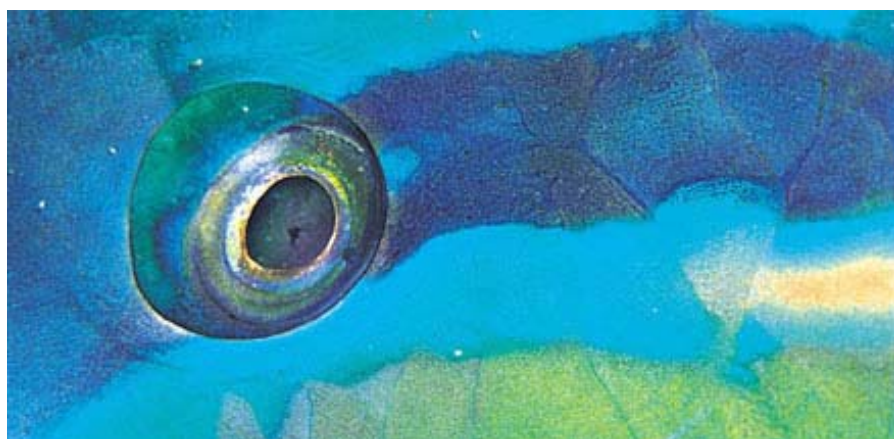
Well, the book is finally here and the wait has most definitely been worthwhile. This is an outstanding book, which will appeal to non-diving coral reef admirers, as well as to divers and underwater photographers. I read it at a single sitting, then went back to feast some more on the beautiful images.

Constantinos set out to document the immensely rich eco-system in the Lembeh Strait in Northern Sulawesi, Indonesia and in the course of 5 months, he completed 320 dives and took 25,000 slides, of which 280 are beautifully reproduced in the book.

Lembeh Strait is in many ways far removed from the traditional idea of an ideal underwater photographer's dream destination. There is little coral, visibility is often low and most dive sites are fondly described as 'muck dives', that is, the bottom is merely an unpromising slope of fine, black volcanic sand. However, Constantinos is able to reveal a complex community of surprising creatures with myriad highly specialised life-styles and a stunning variety of coloration, variously designed to aid concealment, warn would-be predators or attract potential mates.

Constantinos starts his book by putting Lembeh Strait into the context of the huge and populous country of Indonesia and explaining how this otherwise obscure corner of the planet came to be so highly valued by underwater photographers and marine enthusiasts. Throughout, he is generous in acknowledging the assistance offered him by the people of the area, especially the staff of Kungkungan Bay.

Arranged into chapters each one of which focuses on a different topic, the text and images work closely together to explain a number of aspects of the ecology of the area. Constantinos' writing is brim-full of nuggets of behavioural observations, such as how clownfishes become immune to the poisonous tentacles of their host anemones, or how species from cuttlefish to frogfish change and





use their colour. This could be rather dry, but his style is immensely readable and conveys strongly his personal passion for the natural world, as well as the great depth of research that he has done. He tells many anecdotes of missed photo - opportunities, flooded cameras and other disasters, but this cannot detract from his craftsmanship and the professionalism that he brings to his work.

The photography is not only technically superb, but often highly creative too. Unsurprisingly, there are few wide-angle images in this book, which is just one of many features that differentiates it from many other 'coffee table' offerings from underwater photographers. Portraits of fish and other animals in their natural environment make up most of the images, enhanced by a thoughtful layout and informative captions. Personal favourites of mine include a rare image of two male mandarin fish engaged in a fight on the reef at dusk, a tiny octopus making its home in a cockle shell and a breathtaking close up of the eyes of a smasher mantis shrimp.

In his introduction, Constantinos tells us of The Lembeh Strait Preservation Society efforts to achieve Marine Park status for the Lembeh Strait and expresses his wish that this book will provide a valuable resource to help them in that task. I am sure that everyone who reads this book will join him in that wish.

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