

Book review: *Isolated wonder. A scientist in the Robinson Crusoe Islands*

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This is an excellent book and merits special attention. A good read, it is probably best characterized as an amalgam of (1) a project report on twelve expeditions undertaken in the years 1980–2011 (plus the subsequent research work in the laboratory) and (2) an autobiography mixed with (3) reflections of a more general nature on plant taxonomy and evolution. The main aim of Tod Stuessy's project was to understand the processes of evolution leading to the well-known endemics restricted to the remote and very isolated Robinson Crusoe Islands, a geologically extremely young volcanic archipelago in the Pacific and now a Chilean national park. In a sense, this book supplements Stuessy's earlier monographs *Plants of oceanic islands* (Stuessy & al. 2018) and his *Environmental history of oceanic islands* (Stuessy 2020) and offers most welcome background information.

The book has three foci: (1) field work done by a party of botanists on the islands; (2) laboratory work undertaken in the home institutions of the members of his team in Columbus, Vienna and Concepción with its challenges, disappointments and frustrations; and (3) the subsequent publication of the results. The fourth focus is clearly Stuessy's private life, in particular his meeting with Patricia Antonieta Ghivarello Pesce on board the ship *Rio Baker* bound for Robinson Crusoe Island in 1986, his falling in love with her, their marriage and partnership over the following decades. This aspect is written in fine style and adds a special charm and warmth to this text. Stuessy's reflections on the sudden death of his daughter at the age of 31 as a result of cardiac arrest woven into the fabric of his condolences for an inhabitant of Robinson Crusoe Island who had lost his daughter in the 2010 tsunami also merit attention. Admittedly all this is highly unconventional but a sympathetic and holistic approach to the complexities of life.

Although the book basically follows chronology its structure is more complex. It starts with a chapter dedi-

cated to the most dangerous moment during the twelve expeditions at Corrales de Molina on Robinson Crusoe Island. Stuessy's team had to be picked up by a tiny park service boat bobbing as much as three to five meters relative to the rocky shore in a rough and very turbulent sea, which effectively meant that the members were forced to attempt a calculated jump. The next two chapters are dedicated to Stuessy's first meeting with his Chilean collaborators in Concepción and the technicalities of expedition preparations (including a strong plea for a conventional, bound field notebook, a diary and the use of a pocket altimeter to check GPS readings). Chapter four deals with the previous visitors to the islands, among them Rodolfo Philippi and Carl Skottsberg, and is followed by an account of what Stuessy calls "bizarre, unusual and interesting plants". These are the very otherworldly looking endemics of the Robinson Crusoe Islands, which have puzzled generations of botanists. Among these are a small palmiform tree belonging to the genus *Dendroseris* D. Don (now often regarded as a split from *Sonchus* L.; *Asteraceae*), *Lactoris fernandeziana* Phil. (*Lactoriaceae*, a monotypic family endemic to the archipelago, now placed near *Aristolochiaceae*) and the extinct hemiparasitic *Santalum fernandezianum* F. Phil. (*Santalaceae*). Chapters six to eight appropriately titled "Arrivals and departures", "Island living" and "Real isolation" focus on the various aspects of the actual field work and are recommended reading for anyone planning an expedition to a remote spot with very limited communication to home base. Chapter nine is dedicated to Patricia, chapter ten to the 1999 expedition, which had to be interrupted for private reasons, and chapter eleven deals with the second and last visit of Stuessy's team to the tiny Alejandro Selkirk Island off Robinson Crusoe Island in 2011. Chapter twelve, "The heavy hand of humans", summarizes the human interference on the flora and fauna. The bulk of the science is concentrated in chapter thirteen, dealing in par-

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ticular with the findings on cladogenesis based on DNA sequences, as exemplified in the genera *Dendroseris* D. Don and *Robinsonia* DC. (*Asteraceae*). For a historian of plant taxonomy this chapter is of particular interest because it illustrates the conceptual and methodological changes from the moment the project started to the time it reached its conclusion. The final chapter “Perspectives” addresses more general points, like the Robinson Crusoe Islands being a manageable system offering a chance for answering evolutionary questions, much better suited for this purpose than the geologically more complex Hawaiian Islands, Canary Islands and Galápagos Islands. The text is followed by two appendices: the first listing the dates, personnel (names, institutional affiliation, speciality) and collections of the twelve expeditions (pp. 283–286); the second enumerating the publications from the Robinson Crusoe Islands research group (pp. 287–296). The copious endnotes are given on pp. 297–320, and the index listing the names of persons, plants, animals, localities and terms is found on pp. 321–335.

The number of demerits is small. The photographs are of good quality and very carefully chosen, but several are printed too small with the consequence that details are sometimes not sufficiently discernible (e.g. Fig. 15 showing serious invasive plants). The few redundancies in the text could have been avoided, for example the far too many details on the menus in restaurants on the Chilean mainland and on the islands.

Several aspects of this book are exemplary: Stuessy’s constant stress on team work as reflected in the first appendix, the dedication of the book to Daniel J. Crawford, his most important collaborator, and the frequent mentioning of the names of those who were able to solve a particular problem due to their special qualifications, e.g. Josef Greimler’s experience of the relevé technique in making inventories of the vegetation. Obtaining the necessary collection permits for the islands and the division of the collections between the herbaria in Columbus and Concepción are other important topics. The author frankly addresses problems encountered in the field, his own vertigo, conflicts among the members of his team, stress due to isolation, and the necessity for physical preparation for the strenuous expeditions. He also does not suppress mentioning the consequences of the huge hordes of large, friendly, European flies on Alejandro Selkirk Island which Stuessy and his team found highly irritating as well as the dangers of a sudden fall of fog on difficult and steep cliffs. Another excellent point is Stuessy’s constant emphasis on human interference in

the delicate ecosystems of the archipelago, both terrestrial (with feral goats, rabbits and invasive plants today major factors) and marine (overharvesting the population of crabs). He also rightly stresses that “importing aggressive invaders creates another worry” (p. 195). However, to the mind of the present reviewer, the most sympathetic aspect is Stuessy’s preparedness to include more general considerations in his text – on the importance of food, drink, music and an occasional fiesta for relaxation under conditions of extreme and vulnerable isolation, on the selection pressure in academia, in particular in the USA, and on the special communion of biologists with other organisms. Here we find the following sentence (p. 268), which is quoted in full because it offers insights into Stuessy’s way of thinking: “Can you stand in front of a stately magnolia tree, marvel at its height and stature, be amazed that this creature lives in one spot its entire life (that it never travels to any other place in earth), that it seduces insects into transferring its pollen from one flower to another, that it has the miracle of making its own food from the sun – do you think about and *feel* [Stuessy’s italics] the meaning of all these ideas? Biologists often do [...]”. There is also a positivistic subtext in Stuessy’s book and a strong plea for popular science. In the preface (p. ix) he clearly states “The wonderful civilization that many of us enjoy is due largely to the scientific discoveries and technological advances over the past 200 years. We must seek more scientific progress – not backslide into medieval authoritarian systems. Talking to the general reader about what scientists do and why they do it just might be helpful to further a positive attitude to science. At minimum, it is worth trying it”.

This is a great book, not only for plant taxonomists or aficionados of remote islands in the Pacific.

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