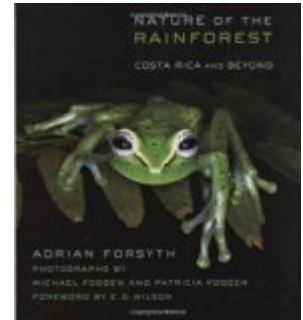


**Adrian Forsyth.** *Nature of the Rainforest: Costa Rica and Beyond.* Photographs by Michael Fogden and Patricia Fogden. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. Illustrations. xv + 183 pp. \$29.95, paper, ISBN 978-0-8014-7475-0.



**Reviewed by** Sterling Evans

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**Commissioned by** Dennis R. Hidalgo (Virginia Tech)

At first appearance, *Nature of the Rainforest* seems like just another beautiful coffee-table book chock full of gorgeous photographs of poison dart frogs and tropical cloud forests that one often thinks of when seeing such books on Costa Rica. But, as the subtitle implies, this book not only goes “beyond Costa Rica” but also goes far beyond normal coffee-table book fare to offer a beautifully written account of many different angles of tropical ecology and natural history. Adrian Forsyth (an entomologist specializing in tropical hornets and wasps, but who could also be considered a consummate student of natural history in the classical understanding of that term) has put together a book of seventeen chapters on different ecological aspects of the tropics in primarily Costa Rica, with some discussion of the Amazonian rainforest of Peru.

The chapters could be stand-alone essays on a variety of different topics ranging in the animal kingdom from beetles, snakes, frogs, sloths, jaguars, and prehensile-tailed mammals, to the plant kingdom on flowers, heliconias, and tropical

fruits. Some chapters are on the ecology of rainforests themselves (e.g., tropical biodiversity, nutrient cycles, and plant-animal interconnections), like the especially engaging chapters on hummingbird-heliconia coevolution and on adaptive coloration (“the art of camouflage” [p. 119]), or animal-animal relations, such as the chapter on termites and various species of tropical edentates (anteaters and armadillos). And a couple of chapters consider specific places like the Pacific Dry forest of Guanacaste, the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve, and the Osa Peninsula (all in Costa Rica), and Manú National Park, Peru. Meanwhile, the accompanying photographs are stellar! They are indeed professional, and many are of rare species that boggle the mind not only in their own life histories but also in how Michael Fogden and Patricia Fogden were able to snap them at all. The pictures help readers feel that they are practically *in* the rainforest when reading through the book—making one almost feel, hear, and smell the forest while reading. I thought at first I would rather quickly skim the pictures and chapters, as one

would do with most coffee-table books. But I learned soon into the first chapter that I would be reading every word, and would want to tell my family and colleagues about many of the amazing stories herein.

All of this is set up very nicely by renowned biologist E. O. Wilson's foreword to the book. In "Forest of Dreams," Wilson provides useful background information regarding the plight of neotropical rainforests, threats posed by deforestation, and reasons why readers should care. "We must learn more about life on Earth," he advises, "and we must learn it quickly" before any more species extinction takes place (p. ix). Thus, Forsyth's information and analysis and the Fogdens' photos are less for wildlife interest and entertainment and more for advancing the need for tropical conservation. In fact, Forsyth writes in the preface that "the book seeks, in a small way, to change what people know and what they want," with the book being overtly "anecdotal and speculative," helping readers to come to the "enjoyment of tropical natural history" (p. xiv). His own enjoyment is visible throughout the book, exemplified when he writes (and voices what I have so often thought when in the tropics): "In the rainforest, close encounters with life that moves are usually rare but brilliant episodes; one is bedazzled for an instant and then left alone in the quiet greenery" (p. 101). More on the scientific side, he relates how the book deals with "classical themes that have long fascinated tropical biologists: the importance of diversity, mimicry, the wealth of species, and nutrient cycles ... [and the tracing of] ecological connections and patterns" (p. xiv).

These goals are accomplished in *Nature of the Rainforest*. Forsyth succeeds in blending scientific data and analysis with an almost storytelling prose that should enthuse both professional and lay readers. As warned, some of the stories he tells tend to be personal in nature, or at least they start out that way. Each, however, weaves fascinating insights into the mystery and beauty of

tropical biology. And they are remarkably well written. For example, note how Forsyth describes the importance of prehensility in some rainforest primates and procyonids (raccoon family members), and specifically here for spider monkeys in their "seemingly death-defying, dangling position": "But seeing a large monkey suspended on high by only the end of its tail is so foreign to the sense of human security that it is rather like watching someone standing too close to the edge of a sheer cliff" (p. 85).

Historians, anthropologists, and other social scientists may wonder why there is such a glaring lack of people in *Nature of the Rainforest*. There is little discussion of conservation history, environmental policy, and the human role in the tropics, and only minor mention of indigenous understandings and lifeways in rainforest environments. I would share these criticisms, especially at moments in the book when Forsyth seems to be heading in the direction of discussing national park development and biological preservation. But he stops short, and there is no mention of any of that literature in the brief "For Further Reading" section. I am supposing that as a scientist his focus is more on the biology and ecological connections of rainforest ecosystems, but the human element has played and will play a significant role in those environments. Seeing it another way, I believe Forsyth is echoing the sentiments of Henry David Thoreau who once wondered who would "speak a word for nature." Forsyth is doing so here; his cause and his words are for understanding and protecting the tropical world. And for that, we should applaud his efforts and gain from his insights.

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