
Views from the Ridge: Exploring the Natural History of Trinidad and Tobago

Julian Kenny

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This excellent, highly professional publication is not to be confused with the same author's memoir "Views from the Bridge" (also reviewed in this issue of *Living World*). It is, first and foremost, a full colour, photographic record of the surprisingly diverse biota of Trinidad and Tobago, with text to put the photographs in perspective, where and in which of the differing ecosystems of the islands a plant or animal is to be found. It is also Dr. Julian Kenny's personal record of a lifetime spent studying and photographing the flora and fauna of this twin-island Republic. Dr Kenny begins this book with the groundwork - the geology that is the foundation of the islands' ecology (and the basis of the economy), the ocean currents that are continually eroding and depositing, eating away at the land here, building it up elsewhere, and the geographic position - so close as to be in sight of the South American mainland. Having set the scene, the view from on high, as it were, Dr Kenny takes his readers into the wonderland that is the flora, of Trinidad and Tobago. At a casual glance it seems there are plenty of full colour, close-up photographs of flowers and plants but, as we learn from the text, these are but the tip of the iceberg of approximately 2,500 species in the 175 families of plants to be found here.

Orchids have been one of Dr Kenny's special studies. It should be no surprise to see many close-up photographs of flowers of these intricate, highly

developed plants in this book.

The bright green iguana on the cover of the book is but one of the animals (including grasshoppers, mantids and other insects, a coral snake, the lovely golden tree frog) featured in the chapter headed "Animals". Sea creatures are given a place in this chapter: the brightly coloured sponges on the rocks around Nelson Island, the flower-like tentacles of stony corals photographed at night, the sea anemones, crabs and fish. Having whetted the reader's appetite with a dazzling variety of photographs, the author gives some brief descriptions of where to find what in the Chapter headed "Distribution of Species". Dr Kenny describes the main ecosystems, from the elfin woodland at the very tip of the highest peaks, to the savannas and swamps on the lowlands, the rocky shore and the sea, the waterfalls and the rivers.

From the natural he then turns his attention to the man-made environment of Trinidad and Tobago: the cocoa, coffee, citrus and coconut plantations, sugar estates and rice fields.

Nature can be red in tooth and claw: Dr Kenny does not shirk descriptions of natural hazards, the poisonous snakes, scorpions, "shinnys," vicious biting ants, fire worms and fire corals.

The last, and perhaps the most important chapter, "The Outlook for Conservation" presents a scenario that, though gloomy, may not be quite as bleak as some fear.

Dr Kenny does not "write down" to his readers; he assumes one has at least a nodding acquaintance with natural science. He does, however, include a comprehensive glossary of technical terms at the end of the book. This "coffee table" sized book is one to treasure for the range of excellently reproduced photographs (in some cases, lovingly and carefully restored). "Views from the Ridge" by Dr Julian Kenny is an important, entirely local publication - only the the author's camera and the film had to be imported.

Trinidad and Tobago has been waiting a long time for such a book to show a wider audience at home and those overseas the beautiful, bewildering variety of nature in two small Caribbean islands off the coast of South America.

Anne Hilton
