



One for the Christmas list

State of the Wild 2006: A Global Portrait of Wildlife, Wildlands and Oceans by Sharon Guynup, for the Wildlife Conservation Society. Island Press, 2005. US\$50.00/US\$25.00 hbk/pbk (360 pages) ISBN: 1-59726-000-2/1 59726-001-0

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Last Christmas, my son was given a *Batman Annual*, with an eclectic mix of puzzles, competitions, merchandising, comic-strip stories and articles from behind the scenes of recent films. *State of the Wild 2006: A Global Portrait of Wildlife, Wildlands and Oceans* is a conservation Annual. It is rather more serious than the *Batman Annual* and I would imagine buying it for an aware and passionate

high-school or undergraduate student in the USA, or for a USA-based conservation populariser or interested non-scientist. In it, they would find a mix of broad essays by top conservationists, many of them very inspiring, although lacking depth, and a few sections containing short topical items of news from the previous year, rather like the ever-popular 'Briefly' section of the journal *Oryx*. They would not find much in the way of scientific analysis; in 300 pages, there are two graphs and one table.

There are some very enjoyable highlights in the book. John Robinson and David Brown conduct a thoughtful and high-level debate on the philosophical basis for interventions to address bushmeat overexploitation. There are also some excellent choices of topical subjects. For example, the section on conflict contained some tantalisingly short essays on fascinating subjects, such as the restoration of Iraq's wetlands and an excellent overview by Peter Zahler of conservation in conflict zones. Each section begins with a poem, which is a nice touch that reminds us of the cultural and literary emotions that the Wild arouses. The people chosen to write essays have produced consistently good-quality pieces, which is a major achievement of the editorial team. The editor has also got the overall tone right:

positive realism rather than doom-mongering about the difficulties that we face.

Low points of the book include the 'By the numbers' section that features at the beginning as well as being scattered throughout the text. This is a nice idea, but numbers out of context can be misleading. The first number in the book is the increase in the number of species classified as threatened on the IUCN red lists, but this needs to be disentangled into genuine changes in the threat status of species, taxonomic changes and development of the listing process. A 'By the numbers' section that looked behind the headline figures would be more worthwhile. *State of the Wild* in general suffers from a frustrating lack of depth; the special sections, such as that on technological advances, could be more informative without losing the lay audience, and would also find a readership in the scientific community. One can get a real sense of wonder from the revelations about the natural world that new technology makes possible.

There is surely an avid readership out there for *State of the Wild*. As the series matures, this Annual could feature on many Christmas wish-lists. I would love to see readers inspired by a series of profiles of the lives of some of the great conservation pioneers; showing the next generation of idealists by example how they can contribute as individuals. I would also like to see an improvement in the quality of the photographic reproduction and one might also hope for a more international outlook and author list. More help with follow-up would also be much appreciated, complementing the broad-brush essays with bibliographies, web links and tips for further reading. But the series has great potential, and I hope that the 2007 edition will continue to build on the foundations of the first.