


# Book Reviews

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## ECOLOGY

**Ecoviews: Snakes, Snails, and Environmental Tales.** By Whit Gibbons and Anne R. Gibbons. 1998. University of Alabama Press (Tuscaloosa, AL 35487-0380). 200 pp. Paperback \$16.95.

 Whit Gibbons collaborates with his sister, Anne, in presenting true tales worth telling. Here are a hundred stories that present the heart of ecology in a painless, rambling Southern way. Whit Gibbons, a herpetologist, is Professor of Ecology at the University of Georgia, Savannah River Ecology Laboratory. The best stories, and smooth lessons, come from the work of the Gibbonses and their colleagues in cottonmouth country.

Although centered in the South, the book examines our nation's environmental conscience by presenting specific dilemmas arising from the meeting of man and beast in all regions of the country. Most frequently the environmental tales are reports on the work of field biologists. It's obvious that these people enjoy themselves while gathering data on pheromones, coevolution, keystone species, parasite strategy, and other eco-ideas. The reader is exposed to all this while wondering if the investigators will survive loose rattlers under car seats and hungry crocodiles at creek crossings.

The research presented is fun, but is it important? Yes, because the work is linked to educating and enlightening kids about nature. The best parts of the book are those that explain how to make our children environmentally aware and how to let children do ecology, the way they do sports or Nintendo®.


This is a book for those who know too little about ecology and also for those who know too much. Unknowing high school and junior college students would profit from being instructed, with two-page stories, that part of our nation's history is natural history. All-knowing professional ecologists and stodgy professors would profit from being reminded, with two-page stories, that the field is where the fun is.

I've been inside, training critical thinkers: juggling Lotka-Volterra equations, balancing Michaelis-Menton flows, and predicting Hardy-Weinberg equilibria. That won't do; the Gibbons remind me that fieldwork is the soul of ecology and that my job as professor is to engender esteem for biodiversity. I need to drag my students out to where the snakes are, to where they can enjoy the ecoviews.

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## GENERAL BIOLOGY

**There's a Hair in My Dirt! A Worm's Story.** By Gary Larson. 1998. Harper-Collins Publishers, Inc. (New York, NY). 58 pp. Hardback \$15.95.

 Cartoons by Gary Larson are a common occurrence in many biology classrooms. He uses humor to demonstrate many biological principles, which enables the reader to appreciate the irony in nature. Nature is not what it seems to be on the surface or what many students think it is. All is not a happy paradise where everyone gets along with each other and where peace prevails. Humans are not the great all-knowing ones who protect nature. Finally, what a person

thinks is from a human perspective that is biased.

Edward O. Wilson writes an introduction to the book warning readers that there is much more to it than first appears. With that in mind, the reader begins the story of a little worm who finds a hair in his dirt and is disgusted by it and by being a lowly worm. His father proceeds to tell him a story about Harriet, a misguided young lady who lives in the forest. In the story Gary Larson covers the ecological principles of food chains and predation, mimicry, communication, importance of plants, and the role of decomposition. He corrects the common misconception of birds falling out of nests, as well as other issues such as snake repulsion, fires, the public's ignorance of introduced species, toads compared to frogs, and the potential for getting viral infections from wild animals. He presents each point by first giving Harriet's view and then what is really happening.

When reading this aloud to students, the book is long and seems redundant. There is no order in how the ideas are presented which means the reader goes from the predation by robber ants to what flowers do, to the lumberjack's role, back to why birds communicate. One idea jumps to another like a string of cartoons loosely assembled. Fewer ideas organized by topic might have made the book easier to read to students. Although all the ideas are about humans' ignorance of nature, basically the ideas fall into three categories: ecological principles, common human responses to natural happenings, and unwise human behaviors resulting from ignorance. The book has two interludes back to the worms at the dining table, which is relief from the seriousness of the ideas included. Also, on each page Larson does little drawings providing humor from the comments or behavior of the animals or plants. A teacher could omit some pages to accommodate the attention span of his/her students.

The book makes students think about their misconceptions and analyze which ones they have and which ones they did not realize they had. Humor is a tool to look at oneself

Rita Hoots, Book Reviews Editor, is a Professor at Woodland Community College and teaches classes in the biological sciences, human anatomy, and chemistry. Her various degrees in the sciences, counseling, and education come from the City University of New York, University of Wisconsin-Madison, California State University-Sacramento, and the University of California-Berkeley. Before entering the education field, Hoots was for many years a researcher in cell ultrastructure and immunology. Her predominant passion in education is directed to the popularization and illumination of science for the public. Her address is: **Science Dept., Woodland Community College, 41605 Gibson Rd., Woodland, CA 95776; e-mail: rahoots@ix.netcom.com.**