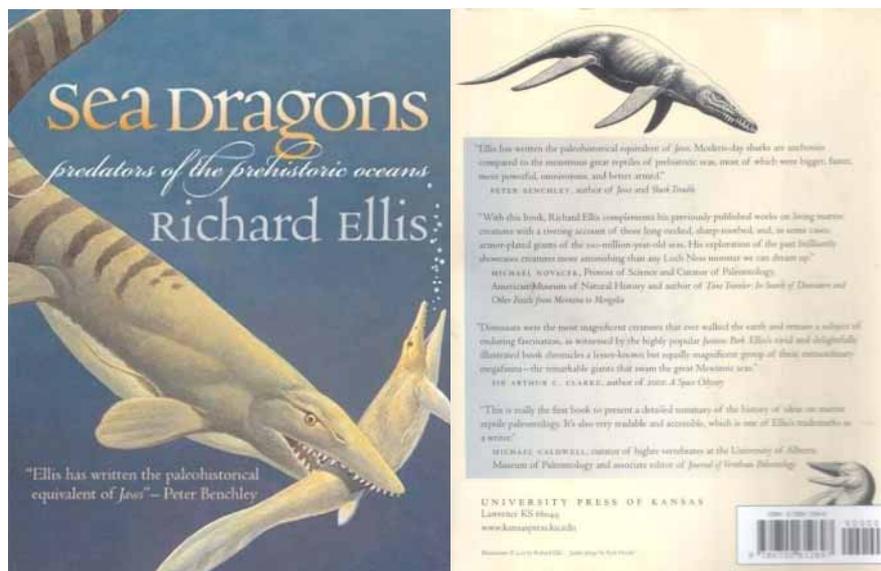


Ellis, R. 2003. *Sea dragons. Predators of the prehistoric oceans.* – Lawrence, University Press of Kansas

Book review by M. Signore



I always read with much pleasure the works of Richard Ellis. A great writer and greatly experienced in the things of the sea, many of his books have left a deep sign in the divulgative literature of the last years. Still, for a palaeontologist the last two books of Ellis are the best. He started with *Aquagenesis*, describing the history of life in the sea (even though too much vertebrate-oriented, to be honest), and he now keeps the pace with this excellent 'Sea dragons'. As Ellis himself notes in the introduction, there are very few books about marine reptiles of the Mesozoic, and this is the first discussing this subject in the last 50 years (if not more); the excellent 'Ancient Marine Reptiles' by Callaway & Nicholls is a collection of papers and not a monograph.

The book opens up with a walk in the American Museum of Natural History, New York and follows with several chapters dedicated to each of the great marine reptile groups that lived during the Mesozoic. It gives a brief glance to what happened in the Palaeozoic, and provides a lot of background and literature, as usual in work by Ellis, concerning each and every subject.

The first chapter is an overview of the marine reptile evolutionary history, as well as a history of discoveries and palaeontology of these strange creatures that so many laymen consider dinosaurs. The ichthyosaurs fill up the first chapter, with many discussions about their biology and life history as the palaeontologists see them. With great richness in detail, Ellis guides us through two centuries of discoveries, rediscoveries and popular lore, including recent studies such as the maximum diving depth and the sight underwater. Then Ellis moves to the plesiosaurs, the "serpents inside a turtle's shell" as Jules Verne defined them in his 'Journey to the centre of the Earth'. Passing through the history of discoveries and errors (such as the supposed reason of the fierce enmity between Marsh and Cope), the author again shows us the elegant long-necked plesiosaurs and their massive and fearsome cousins, the pliosaurs, giving an extended and up-to-date view of their possible locomotion and their life habits.

Then Richard Ellis leads us to the discovery of the mosasaurs, the famous marine lizards of the end of Mesozoic for which the French army paid, according to the folklore, several barrels of good wine and that so much interested Georges Cuvier. Discussing mosasaur's biology and palaeontology, always in his exceptional words, Ellis again gives us an updated view, which is sometimes hard to find for non-workers of these fascinating creatures.

The last seven pages of this very good book are left to a small account on the KT extinction event and Ellis wisely chooses a view, which I fully agree with, of balance in the face of the all too simplistic view of a single killer for the dinosaurs and other Mesozoic life. He understands and tells us that extinction is a complex process, and that only those extinctions we made by ourselves (such as the dodo, the auk, the giant *Rhythina stelleri* and so on) have a clear explanation. Ellis aptly closes his book with Darwin's vision on extinction.

One of the strong points I have ever found in books by Richard Ellis is the graphic aspect: the pictures, always drawn by himself are evocative and very well rendered, and decorate a rich and yet flowing text, that describes in detail the variety of reptiles that evolved back to the sea.

Another thing I like about his books is the plenty of literature references he always indicates. And this book is not an exception, with almost 30 pages of references, a precious bibliography for any person interested in marine reptiles. Unfortunately, many of the cited papers are not readily available in all countries.

The only downside I find is, oddly enough, about his drawings. Though I'm not an artist myself, there seems to be a difference in the quality of the pictures: where most are splendid, a few are less detailed and a bit naïve. For instance, there is a clear difference between the beautiful picture of a swimming *Plioplatecarpus* on page 212 and the *Tylosaur* on page 209. Some details seem less accurate in the latter picture. However, this does not diminish at all the value of this great book.

In summary, 'Sea dragons' is a must for everybody who has an interest in marine reptiles, be it scientific or simply casual, because of the mass of information, the clear language, the passionate story and the sheer number of references! Strongly suggested.

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