

the world and points out ways readers can help and get involved, whether by donating or volunteering.

As Shiffman says so poignantly, ‘there’s an incredibly diverse group of animals older than the rings of Saturn, capable of countless amazing behaviours, critically important to the health of an ecosystem that billions of humans depend on for food, and in serious conservation trouble’ (p. 25). *Why Sharks Matter* is ideal for those wanting to get to know sharks better, debunk some myths, gain a deeper understanding of the political and socio-economic challenges surrounding shark conservation, and hear directly from dedicated individuals who are working every day to ensure sharks are protected.

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### **The Cactus Hunters: Desire and Extinction in the Illicit Succulent Trade** by

Jared D. Margulies (2023) 392 pp., University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, USA. ISBN 978-1-5179-1399-1 (pbk), USD 24.95.

Given that plants are chronically overlooked in wildlife trade research, and broader conservation efforts in general, I love seeing new flora-centric publications and was thrilled to be invited to review Jared D. Margulies’ *The Cactus Hunters*. Succulents are ideal focal species within the botanical world because of their ‘comparatively charming nature’ (p. 168). It is ironic, however, that the charisma that makes succulents such excellent flagship taxa, enticing readers to enter the subject of plant conservation, is the same reason that the book is necessary in the first place. Succulents are so alluring that many species are highly threatened by the insatiable appetite of plant hunters who gather specimens from the wild for private collections. Cacti are one of the most threatened taxonomic groups in part because of this.

The cover art, exemplifying how charming a succulent can be, features a small cactus with beautiful multicoloured flowers nearly as large as the rest of the plant. The small detail of a dashed line around the illustration suggests the image is about to be cut-and-pasted into a different location, just as wild individuals too often are. Based on the back-cover blurb, I was expecting the book to be a narrative travel story in which the author follows in the footsteps of highly trafficked succulents, encountering players in the illicit trade along the way. However, it was apparent from the introduction that it is more than that. The book does deliver a fascinating account of the author’s first-hand experience with some of the most threatened succulent species and those who aim to either collect or protect them, but it also engages with a wide range of theory and analysis.

Even those highly versed in plant conservation can learn something from this book: it draws on gender theory, psychoanalysis, colonial histories, racial stereotyping, capitalist consumerism and political ecology to provide new and important insights into the trade of succulents. *The Cactus Hunters* is organized into eight broad chapters, which are in turn subdivided into short subsections of only a few pages each. This format helps to break up complex analyses into more easily digestible ideas. I really enjoyed this unique method of storytelling woven with academic theory. Margulies does an excellent job convincing the reader of the inherent and almost intoxicating allure of succulents for collectors. Reading about the diversity of stakeholders that he interacted with is fascinating and provides a well-rounded collection of perspectives on which the reader can draw their own conclusions as to what should be acceptable in the international succulent trade.

As much as I enjoyed the book as a conservationist, I think the author misses a few marks. The text is complex and has numerous valuable expert insights, which makes it jargon-heavy and dense in places. This may make it less appealing to readers with less

technical and specialized interests. Furthermore, although the problem of succulent trade is detailed, there is a distinct lack of recommendations for actions that everyday consumers could take in response. For me, the most engaging parts of the book are the descriptions of the author’s personal interactions with succulents or with collectors or conservationists involved with them. I found these anecdotes, although few, extremely captivating, and those passages will stay with me longer than much of the psychoanalysis. The book’s focus on complex theory may bias its readership towards the academic, limiting its potential impact among a broader audience. I also feel that the images in the book fail to capture the fascinating descriptions in the text. Given Margulies’ extensive efforts to convince the reader of how special many of these plants are, going so far as describing one species as ‘so exceptional in color and form that they felt ethereal and otherworldly’ (p. 178), the included photographs do not quite do them justice. Margulies highlights photography as vital to many hobbyist succulent collectors, so I had hoped for beautiful, colourful images. However, and rather disappointingly, the book contains only black-and-white photographs. I thus often set the book aside to look online for pictures of the species being described, which helped overcome this issue but made the book feel less complete.

Overall, I found *The Cactus Hunters* an interdisciplinary read that unveiled the varied motivations and desires behind the illegal succulent trade. Despite the intricacies and complexities of the book, I would certainly recommend it to anyone looking to learn about the plight of threatened flora and what motivates the overconsumption of some of our most beloved plants. I, for one, now have a much deeper understanding of this surprisingly widespread trade.

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