

Sea Monsters – Prehistoric Creatures of the Deep

Reviewed by Adam S. Smith

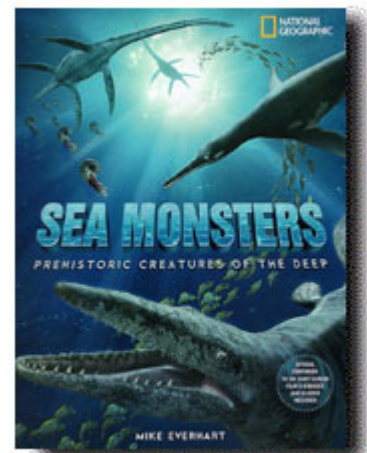
Michael J. Everhart
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Sea Monsters – Prehistoric Creatures of the Deep, is the official companion to the recently released IMAX movie of the same name. As Everhart explains in the preface to this book (and in the final chapter), both the movie and this book have their roots in the ‘Sea Monsters’ cover story featured in the December 2005 issue of *National Geographic Magazine*. The story introduced readers to Mesozoic marine reptiles, presenting information on a wide range of species throughout the Mesozoic Era, and from fossil locations all around the world. For the purposes of the movie, it was necessary to select a single geographical location and point in time. As scientific consultant to the movie, Everhart sold the ‘Oceans of Kansas’ as the perfect setting for the movie; after all, Late Cretaceous seas were “probably the most dangerous seas ever on this planet.” And so it was that the Western Interior Seaway and many of its ferocious inhabitants were resurrected on the (very!) big screen. *Sea Monsters*, the book, allows readers to dig a little deeper into the history and science behind the movie.

Sea Monsters is a large format and highly visual volume. As one would expect from a National Geographic publication and official companion to a 3D movie, the selling point of this book is the imagery. Each of the 191 glossy pages in this book feature stills from the movie, numerous computer-generated artworks (including reproductions of those presented in the 2006 *National Geographic Magazine* cover story), historical photographs and photographs/illustrations of fossils and

skeletons. For the most exciting visuals, however, don the complimentary pair of 3D glasses (to be found in a pouch on the inside back cover) and open up the 3D sections: between each chapter is a selection of three-dimensional stills from the movie, many of which occupy double-page spreads.

Chapter one asks: “what is a sea monster?” The question isn’t really answered (there is no meaningful answer), but allows Everhart to divulge into the diversity of prehistoric marine reptiles, with short sections on the origins and habits of ichthyosaurs, plesiosaurs, turtles, and mosasaurs; and to outline their place in prehistory. The end of this chapter focuses on the Western Interior Seaway, setting the scene for some of the following chapters, which will describe the environment and food webs of the Late Cretaceous period. Chapter two looks at the historical context of marine reptiles, and in particular, the major scientists and ‘fossil finders’ involved in the discovery of the many creatures preserved in the deposits of the Western Interior Seaway. Chapter three reviews the fauna – all



of the key 'characters' in the movie are outlined and illustrated. Chapter five provides an overview of the extinction theories proposed to explain the disappearance of many of the groups 65 million years ago. The last chapter comprises a 'making of' section. Much like Sternberg's famous fossil fish within a fish, nestled amongst each chapter are short self-contained sections; these 'Close Up' and 'Album' sections provide a little more detail, or a 'case study', on some aspect mentioned in passing in the main text.

The scientific content is basic and aimed towards a popular adult audience. Although a sep-

arate children's book is also available (*Sea Monsters: A Prehistoric Adventure* by Marfe Delano Ferguson), the style and depth of text in *Sea Monsters – Prehistoric Creatures of the Deep*, is certainly accessible to older children. The tone of the book is in keeping with the aims of the movie, to simultaneously entertain and educate. Marine reptiles have long been overlooked and overshadowed by dinosaurs in vertebrate palaeontology books and children's books on prehistoric life, but this is slowly changing: look out dinosaurs, here come the sea monsters!