

A review of *Cool Creatures, Hot Planet* by Dennis Littrell, a top-25 Amazon reviewer.

★★★★★ **An adventure of a read**, September 26, 2006

Reviewer: [Dennis Littrell](#) (SoCal) - [See all my reviews](#)

This is a beautiful book, beautifully designed, beautifully edited, and more or less beautifully--well, enthusiastically--written with a nice selection of color photos in the center. True, Marty Essen could have left out a detail here and there--the book is 455 pages long--but when you're chronicling the adventure of a lifetime and agonizing over what to leave in and what to leave out, you naturally leave it all in, including the corny, slightly off-color jokes, the reconstructed dialogue and the atmospheric interior monologues. I think everybody who knows Marty Essen will be glad he didn't overly censor himself because one of the many things that shines clear in this fascinating book is his irrepressible personality.

Almost always up early like a kid on Christmas morning, camera in hand, Essen throws himself into snake hunting, spider adoration, mud trekking, river swimming, mountain climbing, iceberg hopping, and close encountering with hippos, crocs, vipers, and literally hundreds of other wild creatures. I'll tell you one thing, I sure would NOT want to have to foot the bill for developing the photos. Judging from the text my guess is he took tens of thousands of photos along the way. Too bad there was room in the book for only 85 of them, but they are excellent shots of himself, his pretty wife Deb, some animals and plants and some people they met.

But what really counts here is Marty Essen's love for adventure and for the flora and fauna of our planet as is his determination that he miss nothing during his trek through seven continents and some islands with intrepid wife Deb at his side, more than carrying her load. (Lucky guy to have a wife like that. But I wonder how she feels about his revealing that she snores! See page--never mind!)

Clearly, Essen has taken travel writing to a new level. Call it eco-tourism and travel-logging combined with the spirit of Charles Darwin aboard the Beagle. Essen takes notes, collects specimens (but lets them go after the photo op), and turns his notes into a narrative. He's a modest but accomplished kind of writer, combining light humor with some right sharp barbs at ungreen types in the White House and elsewhere. He trades "No Newt is Good Newt" T-shirts in the Amazon for spears and dugout paddles while doing something I wish more Americans aboard would do--that is, show that Americans care about the planet and its people, its cultures and its wild life and not just about exploiting its resources.

Okay, now I must confess some of the jokes really were funny, although I think I'm glad I didn't have to hear the improvised lyrics to some popular songs that Essen dreamed up--e.g., to Black Sabbath's "Iron Man" after getting covered with penguin poo in the Antarctic:

"I am Guano Man!
"Na, na, na, na, naaa
"Na, na, naaa, naaa!" (p. 218).

Here are a couple more examples of Marty's humor: He and Deb are canoeing down

the Zambezi River in the heart of Zimbabwe, when a hippo rises out of the water and chomps through their canoe, throwing them onto the river bank. This inspires Essen to title the chapter, "Hippo Canoe and Zimbabwe Too." (For those readers not intimately familiar with US history, this recalls the election slogan of President William Henry Harrison and his running mate John Tyler in 1840: "Tippy Canoe and Tyler, too.")

Then there's this from page 252: He and Deb are in Borneo hiking a muddy trail high above a river. His feet slip out from under him, but he saves himself by grabbing onto a small tree. He remarks to Deb: "Remember the movie *Romancing the Stone*, when Kathleen Turner and Michael Douglas were caught in the jungle rainstorm? I thought for sure I was going to reenact their mudslide scene--minus the face-first landing between Kathleen Turner's legs, of course."

Bottom line: an adventure of a read, replete with vivid detail about not only the plants and animals, but about the people and politics of the countries visited told openly and even innocently by a man whose love for the planet and its creatures is obvious and infectious.