



Relicts of a Beautiful Sea: Survival, Extinction, and Conservation in a Desert World

Christopher Norment

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Along a tiny spring in a narrow canyon near Death Valley, seemingly against all odds, an Inyo Mountain slender salamander makes its home. "The desert," writes conservation biologist Christopher Norment, "is defined by the absence of water, and yet in the desert there is water enough, if you live properly." *Relicts of a Beautiful Sea* explores the existence of rare, unexpected, and sublime desert creatures such as the black toad and four pupfishes unique to the desert West. All are anomalies: amphibians and fish, dependent upon aquatic habitats, yet living in one of the driest places on earth, where precipitation averages less than four inches per year. In this climate of extremes, beset by conflicts over water rights, each species illustrates the work of natural selection and the importance of conservation. This is also a story of persistence--for as much as ten million years--amid the changing landscape of western North America. By telling the story of these creatures, Norment illustrates the beauty of evolution and explores ethical and practical issues of conservation: what is a four-inch-long salamander worth, hidden away in the heat-blasted canyons of the Inyo Mountains, and what would the cost of its extinction be? What is any lonely and besieged species worth, and why should we care?

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