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Oceans of Kansas – a Natural History of the Western Interior Sea
Michael J. Everhart (2005). Indiana University Press, Bloomington and

Don’t go into the water! I’m told that when faced with the unfortunate and rather grizzly event of
a shark attack, my best chance of survival comes from calmly and collectedly poking the fishy foe
in the eye. But if I were to take a plunge in a Cretaceous ocean, sharks would be just one of many
ferocious marine predators I may be attempting to
prod in the face. I don’t know if the same course of
action applies to a fifteen metre long mosasaur, but
luckily for keen surfers, these terrors are of course
now prehistory. Yet they are not forgotten … as
revealed by Michael J. Everhart in his new book:
Oceans of Kansas – a Natural History of the Western
Interior Sea.

The book was borne out of popular demand. Mike
Everhart’s website, Oceans of Kansas (<http://www.
occeansofkansas.com/>) went online almost
ten years ago in 1996, yet it remains to this day a
valuable and popular online resource for all
manner of information on the fossil-bearing rocks
of Kansas and the extinct fossil animals they yield.
The strength of the website lies in the depth and
scope of the material, and particularly in the
emphasis on visuals – a picture does, after all,

say a thousand words. “But where is the book?” visitors to the website would ask, and Mike has
endeavoured to create one for us. It forms a part of the Indiana University Press’ extensive Life of
the Past series, edited by James O. Farlow.

Like the website, Oceans of Kansas is dedicated to the inhabitants of the depths and shorelines of
the Western Interior Sea. This inland sea completely covered what is now known as the state of
Kansas during the Late Cretaceous. It stretched across the middle of North America from the Gulf of
Mexico in the south to the Arctic Circle in the north, dividing the continent, and formed a home for
a wide diversity of marine organisms. The faunal list includes invertebrates, fishes, marine reptiles,
pterosaurs and marine birds, which frolicked in these ‘oceans of Kansas’ during the deposition of
the Upper Cretaceous, Smokey Hill Chalk Member (the local point of the book), and the over- and
under-laying horizons.

Oceans of Kansas the book occupies a more-or-less empty literary niche. Existing popular literature
is sparse with regard to fossil marine reptiles, which form a large proportion of Everhart’s book.
Richard Ellis’ (2003) Sea Dragons – predators of the prehistoric oceans was the first popular volume
dedicated to fossil marine reptiles since Williston’s (c.1914) ‘Water Reptiles of the Past and Present’
downloadable for free as a PDF from Arment Biological Press (<http://www.herper.com/ebooks/
titles/Water.html>). Yet, where Ellis interpreted fossil marine reptiles purely as living creatures,
Everhart concentrates on the actual fossils too. In this respect, the volume benefits the active
researcher by consistently providing institution and specimen numbers, and by figuring fossil
specimens.

After an introductory chapter, and a chapter describing the historical discovery of the deposits
and the stratigraphy, the book is nicely structured taxonomically as Everhart runs through each of
the groups living in and around the ancient oceans. We begin with a review of the invertebrates,
plants and trace fossils (chapter 3) and move quickly into the vertebrates – sharks (chapter 4) and
fishes (chapter 5). Some of the shark remains belong to the genus shark (Cretosyrhina) pictured on
the front cover attacking a medium sized mosasaur. The first group of marine reptiles to feature
are the relatively rare turtles (chapter 6), followed by the mysterious long-necked elasmosaurid
pterosaur (chapter 7), the short-necked plesiosaurs (polycotylids and pliosaurids) (chapter 8), and
the mosasaurs (chapter 9), including the giant Mosasaurus and the durophagous Globidens.

Chapter 10 takes us into the sky above the oceans to meet the pterosaurs, particularly the
genus Pteranodon, and here we stay in part for a look at the flying and swimming toothed birds
(chapter 11). The last group of animals are the dinosaurs (chapter 12), of which a few must have
been washed out to sea from the surrounding shorelines. The book is neatly tied up in the final
chapter (13), ‘the big picture’, which reminds us, this time in a stage by stage setting, of all we have
learned.

Each chapter is interfaced with tales of historical and personal discovery, with insights into the
excitement of excavation. We are told the more infamous tales from history: the discovery of the
first Maastricht mosasaur, Cope’s erroneous reconstruction of Elasmosaurus with the head on the
end of the tail, and the fish-in-a-fish specimen of Xiphactinus for example. But we are also relayed
a number of equally binding but less well-known anecdotes: how he has discovered new specimens
in the field, how parts of the same specimen have been matched up after many years, and the feud
between Williston and Eaton regarding the anatomy of pterosaurs also comes to mind.
The volume comes complete with a gallery of 12 colour plates: a showcase of Dan Varner’s palaeoart. These paintings are complemented by many (black and white) palaeo-restorations throughout the text (by Russell Hawley), and succeed in portraying the fauna of the oceans as dynamic living creatures. There are also many useful photographs and scientific illustrations/reconstructions accompanying the text.

Minor flaws (typos and figures without scale bars) are few and far between, and are ultimately of little consequence on the impact of the book. Due to the wide taxonomic diversity covered by this book, I recommend it to anyone with a general interest in marine vertebrate palaeontology, but especially (of course) to anyone with an interest in these deposits in particular, and the organisms they yield. It is also perfect for anyone with an interest in the history of North American palaeontology. "Oceans of Kansas – A Natural History of the Western Interior Sea," is an informative and enjoyable read and it is certainly a welcome addition to my bookshelf!

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Early Silurian trilobites of Anticosti Island, Québec, Canada

Over 20 years ago I reviewed the very first issue of Palaeontographica Canadiana and, highly impressed by the quality of production, I expressed the view that if a steady supply of good contributions could be maintained then the monograph series would gain an important place in the palaeontological literature. Happily, that hope has been realised, especially for those of us interested in Lower Palaeozoic fossils, and Brian Chatterton, one of the authors of that first issue and of four others along the way, has produced a veritable tour de force with Rolf Ludvigsen in this, the 22nd in the series.

Some 52 species, 32 of which are new, belonging to 30 genera (one new) are described and superbly illustrated in 84 plates and, in some instances, very clear line drawings. An 85th plate shows the fauna of the uppermost Ordovician formation on Anticosti. The work will justifiedly become a standard trilobite taxonomic monograph, but there is much else that will be of wider interest to Silurian workers. In addition to historical reviews of the island and of previous work on the trilobites and a summary of the lithostratigraphy, the introductory parts of the work place the Silurian (Landovery and possibly lowest Wenlock) faunas in their temporal and palaeoenvironmental context both locally and globally.

A trilobite biostratigraphical scheme is established largely for correlation of the latest Ordovician and Silurian on Anticosti Island. It comprises six "faunas" (considered equivalent to biozones) based on the stratigraphical distribution of species. These are mapped onto the lithostratigraphy and stage-level chronostratigraphy, but beyond a few notes in the text on the conodont zones, there is no direct indication of the equivalence of the faunas to the biostratigraphical schemes based on other groups on the island. A few of the trilobite species are known from successions elsewhere, but the correlation potential of the Anticosti trilobites and the possibility of the wider applicability of the biostratigraphical divisions seem very limited at present.

A taphonomic discussion assesses the occurrences of the trilobites in a range of carbonate and mudrock settings from low energy environments to (most commonly) tempestites and rare mass flow deposits. There are good links between probable modes of life and environmental perturbations, including the recognition of tightly enrolled specimens below thick storm-generated obrution deposits. There are also important observations of the effects of abrasion and diagenesis on the preserved surface microstructure of some species; cautionary tales for the recognition of taphonomic character states.

The assessment of taphonomy and a clear statement of the sampling strategy (in most cases aimed in the field at maximising species numbers and obtaining the best preserved material) provide the necessary background to a consideration of the recurring generic associations of trilobites in the faunas. Four main biofacies are defined and illustrated by histograms and pie charts of representative samples. They are named on the basis of the numerically dominant genera: Calymene, Acernaspis, Encrinurus and Proetus. In the case of the first of these, four component assemblages also of presumed ecological significance are defined. A further two, rarer, biofacies are also defined and represent the shallowest (<30 m) and deepest (80-100 m) water environments yielding trilobites in the Anticosti succession. On a larger scale, the palaeogeographical significance of some of the trilobites (and some notable absences from the succession on Anticosti) is also described. The consideration of the palaeoecology includes a very useful discussion of Silurian trilobite associations described in the literature from around the world, and a comparison of the Anticosti biofacies with them. All this is particularly important as it helps document the recovery of trilobites after the Hirnantian extinctions and a return to alpha diversities that are comparable to those of the preceding Cambrian and Ordovician. The value of this monograph thus extends beyond its undoubted taxonomic strength and it is a very welcome addition to an excellent monograph series.

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