

ter, does he doubt the often questionable and certainly contrarian pronouncements from S. Fred Singer, who wrote the preface to the book and is quoted favourably throughout. My hope is that reputable publishers will solicit independent opinions before embracing self-proclaimed 'truth' books and that readers will learn to be wary of unbalanced books purporting to tell balanced truths, which for the most part turn out to be the real myths. □

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Prediction game

Andrew Watson

Living Dangerously: The Earth, Its Resources, and the Environment. By Heinrich D. Holland and Ulrich Petersen. Princeton University Press: 1996. Pp. 490. \$49.95, £30 (pbk).

FOURTEEN children are named at the beginning of this book — the grandchildren of the authors, to whom they dedicate it. And reading the text is in many ways like being taken on a tour of the planet's resources by a kindly grandfather, full of the wisdom and caution that (sometimes, at least) comes with age. The book covers a rich, almost bewildering range of subjects, which might be expected to make the head spin, but it has been carefully written (and benchmarked, the authors say, extensively on students) so that it manages to flow seamlessly across the disciplines from physics to geology, to economics, to chemistry and back again. In case one's attention starts to flag, there are grandfatherly asides from time to time — newspaper cartoons, quotations from the classics, reference to modern classics such as "Star Trek" and the like. Overall, it is a *tour de force* — a weighty and informative textbook that is always user-friendly and enjoyable to read.

The authors provide a nonspecialist, undergraduate-level account of the status of the Earth's resources and the problems we and our children will face in the next hundred years. Little basic knowledge of the natural sciences is assumed, so there are digressions on, for instance, atomic structure, crystal lattices and basic chemistry slotted in as necessary among a comprehensive coverage of most aspects of 'Earth system' science. As might be expected, there are sections on today's great environmental threats and debates, including global warming, stratospheric ozone depletion and deforestation. But



THE African boomslang snake *Dispholidus typus*. Because its unusually long fangs are further forward in the mouth than other back-fanged snakes, it can cause a very dangerous bite. From *Nightmares of Nature: The Truth Behind the World's Most Dangerous Animals* by Richard Matthews, which accompanies a recent BBC television series. HarperCollins, \$24, £14.99.

there is also plenty of space given to less global but more immediate problems, for example flood prevention and control, or present and future water supply and food provision for the developing world. We are challenged to ask whether it is more important to be concerned with global warming, which may in the future affect billions of people, but which has probably not so far been responsible for a single death, or with the provision of clean water in developing countries, for want of which it is estimated that 5 million children die each year.

People's attitude to the future is determined largely by their own temperament. The authors declare themselves to be "cautiously optimistic". Although they are careful to avoid the excesses of the slash-and-burn exploitation, they firmly reject prophecies of ecocatastrophe, seeing no inevitable crises over food, resources or energy. If we can have just a little foresight, they seem to say, our grandchildren could inherit a world that is really quite pleasant, neither wholly polluted nor exhausted of all natural resources.

They make a good argument, and they almost convinced me, usually a confirmed pessimist. But the annoying thing about the future is that it is so unpredictable. Unforeseen and unforeseeable events such as new technologies, epidemics or wars will probably be what shapes it. This is an enjoyable and

admirable book, but although the authors show us what *might* happen, in the end a crystal ball would be almost as useful in predicting what actually will happen in the next century. □

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New Journals

This year, *Nature's* annual New Journals review supplement will appear in the issue of 5 September. Publishers and learned societies are invited to submit journals for review as well as details of any eligible electronic journals. Journals that first appeared during or after June 1994 and issued at least four separate numbers by the end of May 1996 will be considered. Frequency of publication must be at least three times a year and the main language used must be English. Deadline for submission is 14 June.

When submitting journals for review, please send at least four different issues (the first, the most recent and any two others) of each title, together with full details of subscription rates. For further information please contact Peter Tallack, *Nature*, Macmillan Magazines Ltd, Porters South, Crinan Street, London N1 9XW, UK. Tel: +44 (0)171 843 4567; e-mail p.tallack@nature.com.