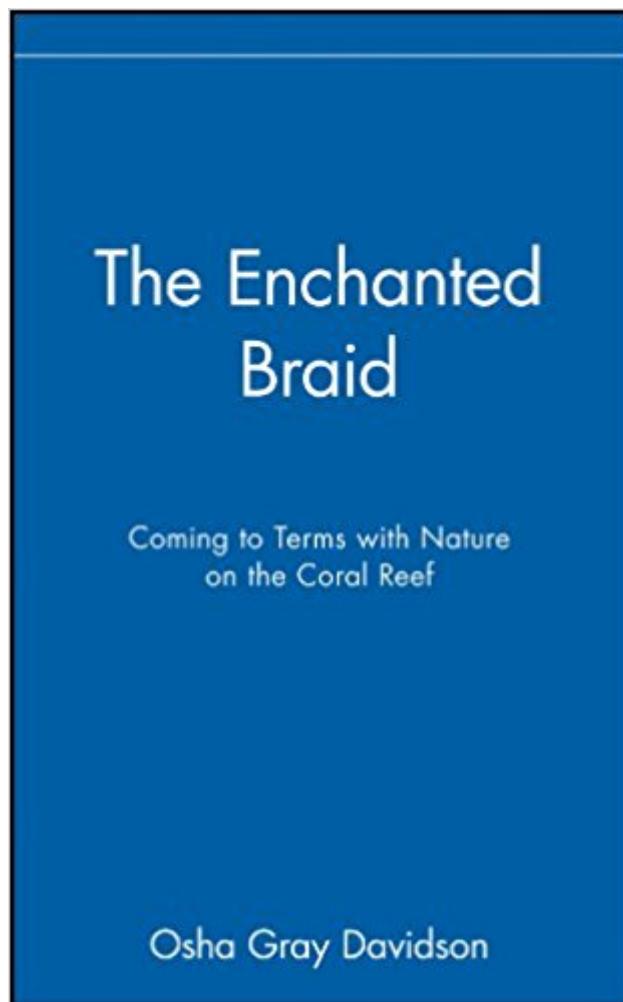


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# The Enchanted Braid: Coming To Terms With Nature On The Coral Reef



## **Synopsis**

"There is a word for what Darwin and the rest of us have felt when in the presence of the reef: 'awe.' Confronted with the reef, awe is the most appropriate response. It is probably in our nature. It is also, apparently, in our nature to destroy that which we hold in awe." --from *The Enchanted Braid* Of the myriad ecosystems populating the underwater world, coral reefs are by far the most complex. While their stunning beauty has been extolled for centuries, the intricate workings of reef environments remained largely hidden from view. In fact, until the advent of scuba diving just fifty years ago, corals have been among the last natural histories to be extensively explored. The high passion with which scientists have greeted this particular investigation --beginning with the foundational theories of Charles Darwin in 1842--is perhaps unprecedented, but hardly difficult to understand. A phenomenon of both awesome beauty and vital importance, the coral reef is home to the most diverse range of species of any environment on the planet, including fish, shrimps, worms, snails, crabs, sea cucumbers, sea stars, urchins, anemones, and sea squirts. The crux of reef life, scientists have discovered, lies in nature's most intimate example of symbiosis: the mutually beneficial relationship between the coral polyp and its "tenant," the zooxanthellate algae. Davidson's history begins with this deceptively diminutive hybrid, the engine behind the construction of the limestone-based coral structure. Together, the three elements comprise a unique zoophytalite (animal-plant-mineral) form, or an "enchanted braid." Aided by an eight-page, full-color photographic insert demonstrating the incredible intricacies of the reef and its unique inhabitants, *The Enchanted Braid* identifies the approximately 240,000 square miles of coral reef on the planet today as indispensable not only to the livelihood of the oceans but also to humans. The reef is, after all, the "soul of the sea," the spawning ground for tens of thousands of marine species. As sources of food (many islands rely on reefs for all their protein), medicine (corals are used in bone grafts and to fight cancer and leukemia), and detailed insight into the history of climatic conditions, coral reefs are critically important to human life on Earth. However, in a world of oil tanker disasters, global warming, and dwindling natural resources, they are also in grave danger of extinction. Osha Gray Davidson's urgent clarion call to halt today's man-made degradation of coral reefs is both alarming and persuasive, effectively underscored by the rich historical context of passages from Darwin's captivating diary of his seminal work on reefs 150 years ago. Like the coral reef, *The Enchanted Braid* is itself a rare hybrid, a graceful combination of aesthetic appreciation, scientific inquiry, and environmental manifesto.

## **Book Information**

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## Customer Reviews

In this work of scientific journalism, Osha Gray Davidson surveys the condition of the world's great coral-reef systems, which offer habitat to countless diverse species of marine life. Many of those systems are now threatened by development--some, ironically, by the construction of resorts for the ecotourism market. Others have been destroyed by the fishing industry's use of dynamite and cyanide to bring in catches. Some 10 percent of the world's reefs, we learn in Davidson's pages, are already damaged beyond recovery, and another 30 percent are in grave danger of joining them. Combining firsthand travel narrative with abundant documentary research, Davidson makes a good case for the importance of conserving the reefs that remain. --Gregory McNamee

"Coral reefs are the proving ground for mankind's ability to 'come to terms with nature' in including our own," writes Davidson (The Best of Enemies: Race and Redemption in the New South), who has lived in Key West and studied coral reefs (both above and under water) for years. Davidson traveled and dove around the world to do his research. His book includes many striking facts: oceans cover 71% of the earth's surface; coral reefs are home to approximately one-quarter of all marine species; the most widely cited estimate of square miles around the world covered by coral reefs is 240,000; Charles Darwin's first scientific book was The Structure and Distribution of Coral Reefs (1842). And one of Davidson's most captivating chapters outlines the bizarre sex lives of fish. Despite reefs' grandeur, we humans have destroyed them at alarming rates, Davidson explains, as we have destroyed much of nature. His imaginative language (for example, "Coral reefs are the Russian

novels of the sea world") and treatment of scientific terminology are impressive throughout. Davidson believes that "if we are to save the reefs, we must understand them better. But here we have come full circle, we have returned to our initial question. How do you comprehend something as complex as the coral reef?" Davidson's thorough book, which helps to do just that, will appeal primarily to environmentalists and divers but should be read by travelers to ocean settings as well. Eight pages of color photos, not seen by PW. Copyright 1998 Reed Business Information, Inc.

This book was required reading for a course that I took in Tropical Marine ecology. It is a rather interesting narrative, that brings together facts and the personal experiences of the author. It would be an excellent book for people who were interested in this topic and whose major in college was not science. As a scientific resource, however, it was very slow reading; it was descriptive rather than detailed, and at times I felt like I was reading the transcript from a Richard Attenborough episode of Planet Earth. Nonetheless, the author hit upon a very important concept for understanding coral reefs and their inhabitants: corals are animals who incorporate into their tissue small plants. This symbiotic relationship gives them the energetic wherewithal to synthesize calcium carbonate which is used in the construction of the calcified reef. Thus, it is the interweaving of the animal, vegetable, and mineral aspects of coral which comprise the enchanted braid, and hence, the title of the book.

Required reading for anyone interested in our oceans.

Even if you have no prior knowledge about reefs, this book explains and makes sense of the entire reef ecosystem. I would highly recommend it, especially for teenagers with an interest in coral reefs and their preservation, to spark their interest in environmental issues.

"The environment is the theater and evolution is the play." -G. Evelyn Hutchinson  
The natural history of coral reefs helps determine the relationship between human and the environment, and an understanding of climate change. The great mystery of the coral reefs is an interesting factor to study on because they represent less than two-tenth of one percent of the area of the global ocean, but overflowing with life in astonishing ways. About ten percent of the world's coral reefs have already been degraded beyond recovery, and another 30 percent are likely to decline significantly over the next two decades. Osha Gray Davidson, an award-winning author, freelance writer, and a photographer, explore an interest in the coral reef to find out that they are an important

essential to understand "the enchanted braid" of our global ecosystem. Coral reefs, often referred to as "the rainforest of the sea," which provides a home to approximately one quarter of all marine species, such as fishes, shrimps, sea urchins, and many more. Coral reefs are very important to the environment because they are responsible for half of all calcium sedimentation occur in the ocean and one of the most complex ecosystem in the sea. Along with that, they help us understand the history of the environment, but also the key to understand climate change. But devastating, climate change and human activities is causing the declining of the coral reefs. And without coral reefs, the susceptibility of all the marine species that depend on the reefs will hit a devastating decline of population, or even worst, extinction. Also, it will be a downfall for humans as well, because some people around the globe also depend on coral reefs for food, livelihood, protection from battering waves, and many more. Therefore, the natural history of the coral reef has hit a roller coaster ride, and will continue to ride it until we do something about it. The beauty and fascinating colors of the coral reefs is important to both the marine life and humans, which Davidson explains so well in this worth reading novel. Since I'm not much of a book reader, reading this book has caught my eyes and fascinate me. I enjoyed every second I read this book. Davidson did a great job in writing this novel and explain well about the natural history of coral reefs. Also, he did a great job in tying why the coral reefs is consider as "the enchanted braid" of the global ecosystem. Additionally, this book features eight beautiful color pages of photographs. And it is an easy read, but with some science terminologies if you are not familiar with. But overall, I enjoy reading this book!

Osha Gray Davidson starts off his book about the coral reefs by telling us exactly how little we really know about the ocean. It, and the coral reefs especially, is teeming with life. He compares the biodiversity of the coral reef to the tropical rain forest and then proceeds to say that even the rain forest cannot hold a candle to the amount of different species living in, on, and around the coral reefs. It is this incredible biodiversity that makes the coral reefs such a precious treasure, but it also makes them vulnerable. There is a delicate balance between the different species on the reef that needs to be maintained or the entire reef will suffer or even die. He then goes on to talk about how coral can be considered an animal, a mineral, and a vegetable at the same time. He also talks about the complex relationship between coral reefs, sea-grass meadows, and mangroves. The second part of the book is about human interaction with the coral reefs and our affects on them. The author talks in depth about what is happening in Jakarta. An entire coral island called Nyamuk Besar completely disappeared. It was killed off by algae, which smother corals. The algae are attracted if the water in

the area becomes too rich in nutrients. In addition to polluting the water with the algae-attracting nutrients, Jakarta also pollutes the water when heavy metals in the air from car exhaust and industrial facilities settle into Jakarta Bay. But it is not just what humans put into the water that hurts the coral reefs, but also what we take out. The calcium laid down by generations of coral has been mined from Jakarta Bay for centuries for use in construction. This, as can be expected, is devastating to the coral reefs. Overfishing also hurts the coral reefs. Fish eat the algae that would otherwise suffocate the coral. When the fish are removed, the algae takes over, killing the reef. Increasing human population has increased the fishing industry and the area is desperately overfished. Although Jakarta Bay is one of the most extreme cases of coral reef devastation, it is certainly not the only place in the world where this sort of thing is happening. The Caribbean, the Red Sea, the Great Barrier Reef, and many more are all showing signs of decline. Davidson makes the case that most of the decline in coral reefs around the world is due to human activity. In addition to the destructive activities listed above, there are other practices that destroy coral reefs. One of these is blast fishing, which involves using small homemade explosives to kill or stun all the fish in an area. Divers then go around and grab all the fish floating in the water. Not only does the practice contribute to the overfishing, but the explosions damage the coral. Davidson is a journalist, not a scientist, and as such he insists that his book *“Isn’t a Scholarly Treatise, but a Natural History of Coral Reefs, and of Humanity’s Relationship to Them, Written by a Layperson for Laypeople (xii).”* And indeed it is. The Enchanted Braid is easy to read and understand. Davidson is able to take complicated scientific concepts and put them into terms that anyone can understand. I was sure I was going to be bored while reading this book, but instead I found it fascinating. The information is presented more like a story than a textbook. Interspersed between the accounts of scientific discovery are personal stories of the author’s adventures diving on reefs and interviewing world-renowned authorities on various coral-related subjects. His personal stories written from a first-person perspective give the book the feel of a novel. The author’s arguments are well laid out and he explains them in a way that makes it impossible to contradict him. He makes you feel his worry for the continued existence of the coral reefs, and by the time you are done reading the book, you want to do everything you can to prevent the continued destruction of nature’s most diverse ecosystem.

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