

In 1987, for instance, a team of US conservationists took a select group of Malagasy ministers to St Catherine's Island, off the coast of the state of Georgia, to persuade them that "the environment and the little lemurs are a prize to be seized". The World Bank wanted to make an example of Madagascar, ploughing cash into development projects in exchange for commitments to conservation. But the Malagasy, cautious about foreign meddling, needed convincing. Jolly describes the minister of water and forests, Joseph Randrianasolo, as a Machiavellian fast-footer who left his fellow ministers "sweating fear like dogs", and the meeting as "probably the most intense three weeks of small-group psychology of my life". The gathering was ultimately a crucial step towards the creation of a National Environmental Action Plan for Madagascar.

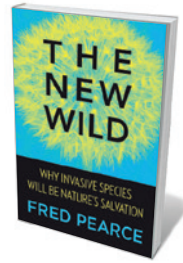
The inevitable setbacks, corruption and inefficiencies will resonate with many conservationists. Jolly's reflections on her stint as an adviser to the corporation Rio Tinto, as it began to develop a titanium mine on the country's southern coast, are particularly interesting. Idealism did not seem to feature in her thinking. She was intensely pragmatic, arguing persuasively that such development, if done properly, can bring huge benefits to both humans and the environment.

In spite of its gritty realism, *Thank You, Madagascar* is never a gloomy read. Jolly's lively writing and dozens of compelling cameos lift it. She meets broadcaster David Attenborough, in Madagascar with the BBC in 2010, who talks of the children's books that inspired him (such as Ernest Thompson Seton's 1898 *Wild Animals I Have Known*). Russell Mittermeier, executive vice-chair of Conservation International, pops up frequently, on one occasion wearing "silver running shorts and silver singlet and brandishing a couple of Antandroy spears". Jolly joins Alison Richard, best known for her work on the behavioural ecology of the sifaka (a genus of lemur), and recalls time spent with ecologist Eleanor Sterling, who was "prepared to gallop after aye-ayes all night long". Primateologist Patricia Wright is particularly inspirational, discovering the rare golden bamboo lemur (*Hapalemur aureus*), rediscovering the thought-to-be-extinct greater bamboo lemur (*Prollemur simus*) and driving the creation of Ranomafana National Park in 1991.

Perhaps through modesty, Jolly does not dwell on the importance of incorruptible and inspirational role models for successful conservation. But without the work of such people, there is no doubt that the world would be poorer — in every sense. ■

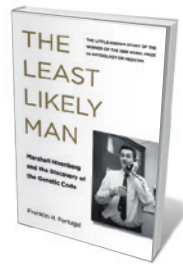
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Books in brief



The New Wild: Why Invasive Species Will Be Nature's Salvation
Fred Pearce BEACON (2015)

Invasive species have an undeserved bad reputation, opines veteran environmental journalist Fred Pearce. Digging deep into famous unintended invasions and deliberate introductions, from jellyfish in the Black Sea to rabbits in Australia, he argues that these cases are rarely as simple as good natives versus evil aliens. Far from being rapacious monsters, animals that thrive when transplanted may be exactly the adaptable chancers that will prosper in a world radically reconfigured by human action. Ecologists must abandon "green xenophobia", says Pearce, to ensure that ecosystems stay healthy.



The Least Likely Man: Marshall Nirenberg and the Discovery of the Genetic Code

Franklin H. Portugal MIT PRESS (2015)

Marshall Nirenberg was outside the club of molecular biologists seeking the link between gene and protein in the 1950s and 60s. Yet it was he who, as a researcher at the US National Institutes of Health, obtained the first experimental evidence of an RNA messenger molecule, and first cracked the code of an amino acid. Although its narrative structure is a little confused, biologist Franklin Portugal's biography reminds us that Nirenberg sits in the Nobel pantheon alongside Francis Crick, James Watson and Sydney Brenner.



The Container Principle: How a Box Changes the Way We Think

Alexander Klose, translated by Charles Marcrum MIT PRESS (2015)

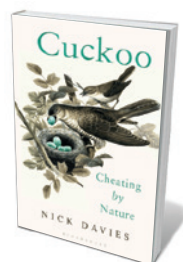
Unseen by most, the global movement of shipping containers connects us all, maintaining the lives we live and the societies we form. Alexander Klose is fascinating on the technical details of the global swirl of millions of twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs) and the agents — from artists to accidents — that bring this mobile infrastructure to light. At other points, Klose's philosophical reading of the phenomenon is laid on thick, but this is a much-needed examination of why the TEU is the defining technological artefact of our age.



Making Marie Curie: Intellectual Property and Celebrity Culture in an Age of Information

Eva Hemmungs Wirtén UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO PRESS (2015)

Marie Curie remains the most famous of female scientists. In the analysis of how the co-discoverer of radium became uniquely idolized, cultural scholar Eva Hemmungs Wirtén uses the prisms of celebrity and intellectual property — Curie and her husband, Pierre, having famously refused to patent radium. Wirtén's picture of a scientist carefully shaping her own image is less angelic than the traditional view of Curie, but might have much to teach her modern successors.



Cuckoo: Cheating by Nature

Nick Davies BLOOMSBURY (2015)

This detective story by behavioural ecologist Nick Davies sets out to solve how "Nature's most notorious cheat" gets away with its "outrageous" behaviour. This is the cuckoo (*Cuculus canorus*) — that well-known hijacker of other birds' nests. Davies underpins calm and elegant prose with deep knowledge gleaned from years studying the species. By the end of the book, it is hard not to feel the same joy as Davies does when contemplating this remarkable bird, or the same sadness at its apparent UK decline. [Daniel Cressey](#)