

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Svalbard life*, by Paul Wassmann & Rudi Caeyers (2013). Trondheim: Akademika Publishing. 348 pp. ISBN 978-82-321-0211-2.

The author, Paul Wassmann, is a professor of marine biology at the University of Tromsø, and the designer, Rudi Caeyers, is a photographer and graphic designer at the same university. *Svalbard life* is a generously illustrated coffee-table book on the Svalbard Archipelago and surrounding seas.

The book takes the reader (and viewer!) on a journey through time and space, from early Greek notions of Ultima Thule, through Svalbard's landscapes and history, important ecosystem elements and species of the Far North, the communities and people of Svalbard now and then, Svalbard in art, climate change in the Arctic and, finally, a discussion about how to meet the challenges of global warming.

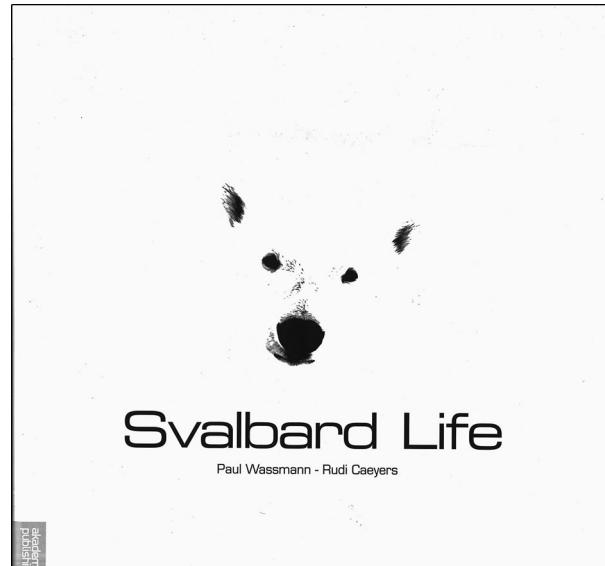
When I opened the book for the first time, the beauty of the large illustrations overwhelmed me. At the same time I was surprised by the wide range of topics, from hardcore natural science to art and philosophy. *Svalbard life* is not a work of reference or a guidebook on Svalbard, but a book based on the author's personal knowledge and contemplation. As the author writes in the introduction, the book "is not a paved road, but ... meanders in the search for 'flowers'. It constantly looks for diversity, ideas, and enjoyment" (p. 12).

The illustrations are outstanding, and underline the intention to combine science and art, and—of course—to call attention to the beauty of the Svalbard Archipelago and the High Arctic. The size of the book offers good opportunities to present the pictures of Rudi Caeyers and other photographers, and the use of many paintings gives the book an extra dimension, which is quite unique.

It is of great value to integrate different approaches from science, history, art and philosophy to give the background for what Svalbard is today, and to better understand the challenges of climate change in the Arctic. *Svalbard life* is a sincere attempt to pave the way for a more holistic, multidisciplinary understanding of what the consequences of climate change in the Arctic can be, and how scientists and others should meet these challenges. Among the author's main solutions are Earth

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System Science, resilience thinking and to develop a more human-friendly communication.

But the price for presenting so many different aspects in detail is the risk of getting things wrong. Unfortunately, *Svalbard life* contains some errors. Among these are the wrong years given for the signing of the Svalbard Treaty and the final mining disaster in Ny-Ålesund, two very important incidents in the history of Svalbard! Some of the statements regarding the physical features—for example, "global warming may facilitate an increase of their [glaciers'] volume" and "calving fronts can be more than 100 m high" (pp. 43–44)—could have been explained in a better way to avoid misunderstandings. The place-names are not always in accordance with official orthography, and the common error of conflating Svalbard (the archipelago) with Spitsbergen (the main island) occurs. As mentioned earlier, the illustrations are mostly outstanding, but some of the small photographs do not keep the high standard. And I am very surprised to find that all the hunting pictures are photographs of stuffed figures from the Polar Museum in Tromsø.

Compared to other coffee-table books from this part of the world, *Svalbard life* is a unique attempt to synthesize different disciplines and ways of presentation, and the use of visual art is very successful. But I find it hard to believe that Svalbard—economically sustained by the import of tourists and the export of coal—"is the last bastion of a fading human civilization" (p. 339), as the author writes at the end of the book.