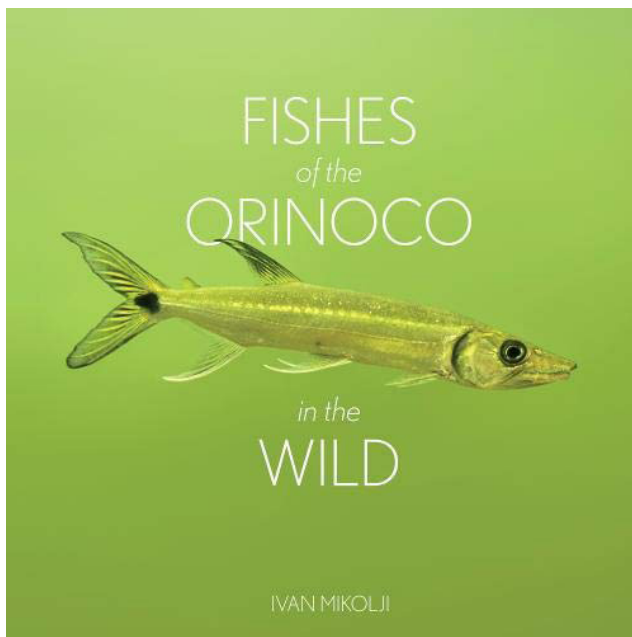


Fishes of the Orinoco in the Wild

Mikolji, Ivan

2020. Delray Beach, FL, USA / Padstow, UK: Mikolji Corp / T J Books, 394 pp. + [ii]
ISBN: 978-1-83853-883-5 (hardback w/dustjacket, 25.5 x 25.5 cm). USD 125.00.
Distribuido por info@mikolji.com



Contents: The Author (by Eduardo Planchart Licea, PhD); Acknowledgments; Foreword (by Nathan Hill); Preface; Introduction; Venezuelan Caribbean Mountain Range; Great Morichales of the Northeast; Llanos; Flooded Savannas; Western Guiana Shield; Lost World; Sierra de La Macarena; Order Beloniformes; Order Characiformes; Order Siluriformes; Order Cyprinodontiformes; Order Perciformes; Order Symbranchiformes; Order Myliobatiformes; Species List in alphabetical order; Abbreviations; Glossary; Patrons.

We had waited for at least a decade for this work to come to light. I met its author, Ivan Mikolji, in 2010. He seemed to me, above all, a brave and daring scientist, capable of diving in the waters of creeks, rivers and lagoons in southern Venezuela without fearing the sudden electric shocks of the *Electrophorus*, the painful spurs of the sting-rays or the terrible bites of the frenzied piranhas. He came to my office at the Venezuelan Institute of Scientific Research accompanied by a mutual friend, my old classmate, Alfredo Pérez, ichthyologist and then professor of fisheries at the Universidad Nacional Experimental de Los Llanos “Ezequiel Zamora”. Ivan presented me with a series of impressive underwater videos, in which I was able to appreciate for the first time in their natural environment many of the colorful fish from the Venezuelan Amazon that I used to acquire in aquarist stores in western Venezuela when I was a child (often at quirky high and bloated prices). He spoke to me with simplicity and humility about how he achieved such impressive and original shots with unsophisticated underwater video cameras. However, I immediately noticed that this new-found character was not at all, neither a fish amateur nor an ordinary photographer. He is a subject who knows nature, the freshwater fishes of his country and the technological resources to carry out his intentions to record them for posterity. I appreciated the occasion positively and promised to explore the possibility of involving Ivan in an institutional project to produce at least one documentary video about the living fauna of freshwater fish in Venezuela. I do seem to recall, however, his brief intention to produce a book with high-quality images of the little-known world he had been exploring. A short time later I stopped occupying the only position that would have allowed me to crystallize the support I

dreamed of for Ivan. However, this did not mean much in the personal and very independent agenda of the author who, at last, has recently managed to produce a magnificently illustrated book in which 151 species of freshwater fish can be seen in their wildest splendor. They represent a no less astonishing variety of 89 genera, distributed in 28 families. In terms of species numbers it means nearly 14% of the recorded ichthyofauna of the greater Orinoco basin, which contains one of the most complex networks of rivers and flooding areas of the American continent.

I will continue to comment on the simplest thing that this book offers, which is the visual enjoyment of unrepeatable images of biological diversity, animal colors, shadows and contrasts and the indescribable mysterious effects that sunlight produces when penetrating translucent waters, yellowish or reddish, of the rivers and pools of the Orinoco basin and other surrounding regions. Some of the orders of fish found in these regions are barely represented by one or two species. Such are the cases of the stingrays (Potamotrygonidae, Myliobatiformes), the needlefish (Belonidae, Beloniformes), the eel *Symbranchus marmoratus* (Synbranchidae, Synbranchiformes) or the peculiar Amazonian leaf fish *Monocirrhus polyacanthus* (Polycentridae, Perciformes), all visible here in sharp images. Other more diverse groups such as the Siluriformes (catfishes in general) and the Characiformes, whose variety seems infinite, have been documented through the most unusual forms, as in the case of certain armored catfish and corydorras among the former, and the precious tetras, some *Serrasalmus* and *Leporinus* among the latter, all rather notable for their highly contrasting coloration. For me, a favorite group of fish, due to their rare beauty and ornamental potential, are the cichlids, equally representatively portrayed in this work.

Many of the photographs taken by Ivan Mikolji in his intrepid endeavor, document not only the species and their habitats but also the distinctive behaviors of some species. I can mention as examples the remarkable gregariousness of certain corydorras (pp. 231, 232-233) and piranhas (pp. 208-209), and the unique vertical positioning of the pencil fishes (pp. 184-187). Likewise, when studying the group of fish represented in this book, we cannot help but be amazed at the astonishing diversity that exists in some of the sites explored by the author, the case of Caño El Pozo in the state of Amazonas in Venezuela, or Caño Verde, in the Department of Vichada in Colombia. The environments of these rivers and of many others, as well as the circumstances in which the photographic record of their ichthyofauna was achieved, or the ethology of the animals, are eventually described in the text with a particular poetic accent that hints at the author's sensibility towards nature

and its romantic inclinations. These are the traits of his artistic side, never detected during our first acquaintance.

I want to mention some photographs that have impressed me quite a bit because of the sharpness with which the static animals are presented in the foreground, contrasted with a background of absolute depth, almost dreamlike. These are the images of *Acestrorhynchus microlepis* (pp. 48-49), *Iguanodectes cf. gracilis* (pp. 174-175) and *Semaprochilodus kneri* (pp. 198-199). Personally, I consider that these images are perfect.

A portfolio type of book like this must be enjoyed (due to its format, size and weight) on a table, wide open. The information, both visual and written, is to be perceived as a whole in the way it is presented in a double page. Some readers might be critical at appreciating the layout and design, in which the main photograph is reproduced filling the entire space of the right page and a third of the area of the left one. This seems to me quite artistic and original for this kind of portfolio. There are a few cases of two pictures presented per double page, but in these instances there is always one main picture shared between two pages. This was the creative choice of the designers and printers, a recognized award winning British independent group (<https://www.tjbooks.co.uk/>).

Every fish species in each photograph is identified in an individual caption, with its Latin name, an author's code, date (month and year when the picture was taken), locality (water body, state, country, biogeographic region), photographic equipment employed and its setting specifications. Latitude and longitude.

In the remaining space of the double page, which is two thirds of the square page to the left, the accompanying illustration is coupled with its species data sheet, which contains its Latin scientific name, taxonomic author and date of description, and its common name in English (when known). Following, a personal description of the experience of the author when observing and photographing the animal, with relevant bionomic notes and geographic distribution information. Then, its classification in descending hierarchical line: order, family, genus and species. Etymology of the scientific name, which often is either curious or very interesting, especially from a historical point of view; geographical distribution known for the species; individual size of the fish species (presumably, maximum total length. In any case just as a reference to give an additional idea to the reader, who might not be familiar with this fauna); pH and temperature range of the water favorable to the species (which means that a lot of these data should have been taken in the field by Ivan Mikolji himself). The data sheet ends with information notes on the sympatry or coexistence of the taxon with other species.

This is a good and original issue, as it gives a reasonable idea of the type of fish community in which the species selected interacts with others, and it is also a good clue to investigate appropriate places and the right spot to search for a particular taxon.

The scientific character of this work is availed by the revision of Donald C. Taphorn, one of the most respected and competent ichthyologists and fish systematists in Venezuela and elsewhere, expert in the freshwater fauna of northern South America, particularly Venezuela (where he used to be a notable staff member of two national universities for more than 20 years) and Colombia (where he has also participated in a number of research projects). Several experienced ichthyologists from the northern South America “cluster” (chiefly from Venezuela and Colombia) have collaborated in this Art-and-Science Project providing their expert knowledge to help Ivan Mikolji with the identification of the species represented in this beautiful pictorial sampler, namely D. C. Taphorn, A. Machado-Allison, C. Lasso, O. Lasso-Alcalá, C. Do Nascimento, W. Streck, F. Magallanes and L. Mesa Salazar. It should be stressed that it is not an easy task to identify through photography some small freshwater fishes from such a vast and biologically diverse area. Many morphological characters used in diagnosing closely related taxa or species from different genera that share similar appearance may not be evident in photos, and only true experts are capable of successfully doing this work.

This book is original also by the fact that it reflects a major effort to present the identity of the aquatic plants depicted with the fishes in the wild. The author consid-

ers plants an important component of the freshwater environment or subaquatic microhabitats to which some particular fish species are evidently associated. This task, not simple or trivial by any means, was well accomplished by Venezuelan botanists Francisco Delascio and Sixto Rodríguez.

The sober curation of the collection of photographs sharply reproduced in this high-quality, well designed and beautifully produced book, was the responsibility of Venezuelan art scholar Eduardo Planchart Licea, a most knowledgeable, noble and affable character. I have personally met him in Caracas, two and a half years ago, during the opening of one of Ivan’s photographic exhibitions, which was not precisely on fishes, but conceived by that synergic duet, Mikolji-Planchart, as a selection of oddly colorful and skillfully framed –documentary, figurative and abstract– scenes of the underworld of our freshwater bodies. There, I understood the need for a curator. The photo sequence I was able to watch and examine, represented a genuine storyboard of a magic play between light and water, unlike any other photographic work I am aware of, in Venezuela. *Fishes of the Orinoco in the wild* has a pinch of that figurative expression in its pages. I wish potential readers can see soon this remarkable production, full of incredible shots and unique compositions that are only possible through the esthetic intuition and the trained eye of Ivan Mikolji, the explorer, the naturalist, the man of technological avant-garde, the photographer, the writer and the artist.

Ángel L. Vilorio*

* Centro de Ecología, Instituto Venezolano de Investigaciones Científicas (IVIC), km 11 carretera Panamericana, Altos de Pipe, estado Miranda, Venezuela.