FOREWORD

Harry W. Greene

Amphibians and Reptiles of Baja California is the fourth volume in a new University of California Press series on organisms and environments. Our themes are the diversity of plants and animals, the ways in which they interact with each other and with their surroundings, and the broader implications of those relationships for science and society. We seek books that promote unusual, even unexpected connections among seemingly disparate topics, and we want to encourage projects that are special by virtue of the unique perspectives and talents of their authors. Our first volume, by Carl E. Bock and Jane H. Bock, concerned the ecology of Arizona grasslands. This was followed by a field study of Bornean treeshrews, by Louise H. Emmons. Forthcoming books focus on Seri ethnoherpetology, by Gary Paul Nabhan; the American bison, by Dale F. Lott; and lizard biology, by Eric R. Pianka and Laurie J. Vitt.

L. Lee Grismer's volume comprehensively summarizes the herpetology of a remarkable and in some ways deceptively simple chunk of the earth. Seen from space, the world's second largest peninsula appears as a narrow extension of western North America, separated from mainland Mexico to the east by the Sea of Cortés and seeming altogether distinct from the country to which it belongs. In fact, several million years ago this spectacular landscape was cobbled together when a sizable piece of continent broke free, drifted west into the Pacific Ocean, and then fused with a smaller peninsula from the north. Seen from the other extreme, for a foot traveler stranded without water, some parts of Baja California would be exceptionally foreboding desert, seemingly unable to support life. However harsh, though, the peninsula and its offshore islands are far from desolate, having long been hotbeds of

ecological and evolutionary processes. Flanked by rich marine environments, their terrestrial habitats include wind-blown sand dunes, precipitous rocky slopes, semitropical oases, and montane forests. Under scrutiny, especially after a good rain, these places reveal astonishing biological diversity and natural beauty. Among Baja California's more than 160 species of amphibians and reptiles, many of them endemic and highly distinctive, are incomparably vivid blue and yellow lizards, rattlesnakes without rattles, and other such living treasures.

We often care more about what we understand, and this makes the growth and spread of knowledge critically important in fostering conservation. Detailed natural history, however, requires years of work by many people, particularly for arid regions where so many organisms are usually out of sight. Although the first summaries of the Baja California herpetofauna were made during the late nineteenth century, this volume documents far more species than were known to those early scientists, and future studies will no doubt yield further surprising discoveries. But the book goes beyond the description of new forms of life, for our view of that diverse biota as a mixture of once geographically disjunct elements also reflects a changing interpretive context. Barely forty years ago the earth's landmasses were thought to be constant in location, and Baja California biogeography was paradoxical: the closest relatives of some species found at the tip of the peninsula are in southwestern Mexico, rather than farther north on the same landmass. That would imply that their ancestors had marched up around the Sea of Cortés and down to the cape region yet left no fossils or relict populations along the way. By 1980, though, the stage was set for reinterpretation of fau-

nal distribution in the light of continental drift, and we can now more profoundly appreciate Baja California for its wonderful exposition of geological history, ecology, and evolution.

Amphibians and Reptiles of Baja California not only summarizes the findings of many previous biologists but also presents the results of a tremendous amount of painstaking, sometimes dangerous fieldwork by the author and his associates. The book is enriched throughout by that firsthand experience, the consequence of a lifelong passion for natural history. A self-confessed “born herpetologist,” fascinated by Baja California since early childhood, L. Lee Grismer grew up to become a professional evolutionary biologist and biogeographer. Indeed, Grismer has been an active player in the recent conceptual advances in those fields, and his personal perspectives, especially regarding the problem of which populations to recognize as separate species, pervade this book. Grismer’s skills as a world-class

photographer also are abundantly displayed here, perhaps most dramatically in those images that capture a species’ place in nature, taking us into a landscape with an animal in the foreground.

In a country with phenomenal natural riches, Baja California and its offshore islands stand out as a priceless setting for studying the factors that shape ecological communities, and they are replete with stunningly beautiful locales for recreation and education. Scholars, students, and lay naturalists will find *Amphibians and Reptiles of Baja California* an invaluable sourcebook for the present; in an age of global environmental change, this volume also provides a critical benchmark for the future. For everyone, residents and visitors alike, who wants to study and enjoy nature in this famous landscape, and for all of us who want to preserve such spectacular diversity in the face of ever-growing human impact, Grismer’s book will be an essential resource.