

AT A LOW POINT

By Daniel B. Zukowski

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The Dead Sea is the lowest point on earth. For Alanna Mitchell, author of “Dancing at the Dead Sea: Tracking the World’s Environmental Hotspots”, it is both a metaphor for our abuse of the planet and a symbol of hope for a new understanding of our relationship with the environment.

Mitchell is the former earth sciences reporter for the Toronto Globe and Mail, and is currently a communications strategist for the International Institute for Sustainable Development. Her passion for her subject is clear, even if it sometimes gets in the way of telling the story.

The Dead Sea, where we first meet Mitchell in the introduction, has been shrinking rapidly since Jordan began to divert the water that feeds it for irrigation in the 1960s. Today, it is just two-thirds the size it was 50 years ago. We learn this fact 113 pages in.

Mitchell, who can write a travel piece with the best of them, truly gets started in Chapter 2, only after walking us through Oxford, climate change and Darwin. Once past the antechamber, she takes us on a thrilling journey from the Canadian Arctic to Madagascar, from Iceland to the Amazon, and from the Rocky Mountains to the Galapagos. She shows us global warming through the eyes of the Inuvialuit of Banks Island, where the ice no longer freezes solid. She takes us to Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar, where the forests are disappearing at a prodigious rate and where the only hope to save them may be a controversial mining-company proposal.

To Mitchell, everything has a “shelf life,” including the human species. Her hope is that if we can change our unspoken belief in an inexhaustible planet, the Dead Sea will bear witness to our dancing for ages to come.

“Dancing at the Dead Sea: Tracking the World’s Environmental Hotspots”

By Allana Mitchell

228 pages

The University of Chicago Press, 2005.