

On the Sponge Islands: Loss and Restoration in the Aegean

Julia Martin

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South African scholar Julia Martin's mesmerizing and evocative memoir covers sponge diving from an anthropological perspective.

While on sabbatical, Martin traveled to the Dodecanese Islands in the Aegean Sea to study Porifera, whose porosity intrigued her as a "trace" or "metaphor, perhaps." This book details her investigation of the sponge industry, which once employed naked divers and flourished after a cumbersome diving suit was introduced in the 1860s. Its sense of wonderment darkens with its coverage of the perils involved in using the helmeted suit, which was known by locals as "Satan's Machine." Later harvesting methods proved unsustainable.

Oral histories, including from former divers, are interspersed with facts, as of medical uses for sponges, their appearances in literature, and the clamor for bath sponges in Victorian England. Context is provided for why the humble marine invertebrates were so prized as "golden fleeces of the deep," becoming a fascinating focal point for people across cultures. The sponge trade's wealth is represented via stately buildings, too.

Martin's island-hopping was also haunted by visual reminders of World War II and present-day migrant boats underscoring refugee hardships. Her book discusses Greek people's willingness to help as well. In contrast, the poetry of picturesque wild herbs and rock roses is covered, as are the warm traditional practices of villages altered by tourism.

Avid curiosity permeates the prose; judgment is reserved when the ecological problems of sponge diving become clearer. References to past research, including to Russell Bernard's work, fill in the background. A final section exploring green energy initiatives on the islands is hopeful.

A work of singular focus, the scholarly memoir *On the Sponge Islands* includes illuminating bits of natural history alongside its accounts of a tour through the Greek sponge trade.

KAREN RIGBY (May / June 2026)

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