

Captain Cousteau and the Collectors

KIRA KIRA, Solomon Islands — Captain Jacques Cousteau's suggestion to the California Legislature of prohibiting the selling of shells and tropical fish and totally prohibiting spearfishing and certain other types of collecting (See "Captain Cousteau and the Shell Collectors," HSN Oct. 1975) is not justified by the biological facts.

No marine fish or invertebrate has been exterminated by man and none is really threatened with extinction at the present time. On the other hand, many species have been overfished and local populations decimated. The problem is one of properly managing the resources involved and this does not require the blanket prohibition necessary in the case of endangered species.

Most marine fishes and invertebrates have huge populations scattered over a large geographic area. Reproductive capacity, growth, and natural mortality are all high and the tiny percentage taken by fish and shell collectors is largely insignificant except in very limited areas that are heavily collected. Such areas can be easily protected where desirable. In the case of spearfishing, additional restrictions as to equipment, species, numbers, and sizes can be instituted generally.

Collecting shells and keeping marine aquarium fish are harmless, intellectually rewarding hobbies. Collectors and aquarists as a group are a strong force in support of conservation and, moreover, have a direct personal interest in it. Many professional marine biologists obtained their first interest in such a career through shell collecting or keeping an aquarium. Spearfishing is largely an activity of young people who do not have the money for scuba diving or underwater photography. Most of them later outgrow spearfishing and go on to more worthwhile pursuits, as did Captain Cousteau himself.

In the long run, when we ban activities that interest people in the natural environment, we do conservation a disservice. People with no interest in the natural environment usually have little concern with protecting it. Likewise, grossly exaggerated claims of widespread destruction and imminent environmental disaster do not help the cause of conservation. Although such claims attract a lot of attention, people soon lose interest when nothing drastic happens. It's the old business of crying wolf. In addition, such exaggeration detracts from very real environmental problems such as large human populations that use far more resources than their environment can continue to provide, and economic activities that squander vast quantities of resources or devastate the environment.

As a marine biologist whose whole life is involved with the sea, I am personally concerned with properly managing and protecting marine life. I am very much in favor of Captain Cousteau's efforts to promote interest in the sea and marine conservation generally, but when he makes specific recommendations on conservation legislation he is entering an area in which he is qualified neither by training nor experience. Unfortunately, because of his popular image, his opinion is likely to carry more weight than it deserves.

His suggestion of a total prohibition on collection is nothing more than an attempt to stop other people from doing what we are not interested in doing ourselves, either out of a sense of self-righteousness or so that what we wish to do has no interference or competition. Thus sport fishermen want to stop commercial fishing, line-fishermen want to ban spearfishing, and naturalists want to prohibit anyone from taking anything.

If Captain Cousteau really desires to have a beneficial effect in California, he can use his influence to call upon the large marine science community there to draw up recommendations for legislation to manage marine resources in a biologically and socially sound manner.

Dr. Walter A. Starck

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Speaking of Books

THE WORLD OF SHELLS, by Robert Scase and Eric Storey. Reading, England: Osprey Publishing Ltd. xxii + 106 pages. U.K. price £2.95 (U.S. price not stated)

HMS member Robert Scase, librarian at the Royal Horticultural Society's garden at Wisley, Surrey, has produced a little gem of a book about beautiful shells. Most of the specimens are from his own collection — obviously a fine one — but he has drawn in a few instances on other collectors, including at least two other English members of HMS. With such credentials, how could a book go wrong?

The World of Shells is not intended for beginners. I suspect that it would be of greatest value to an intelligent adult who knows little of shells, but is interested in learning. It has 106 excellent color photos, each supported by a hundred words or so of nontechnical explanation, the effect of which should be to lead the reader into further study. It does not talk down to the reader; neither does it stun him with "malacol-ese".

The introductory pages tell just enough about shell classification, ecology and structure to guide the reader, plus a few words on forming a collection and joining a shell club. Perhaps the best description is that it's a comfortable book to have around.

Stuart Lillico

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