

Notes on

BECHE-DE-MER

Bicho - de - mer

From Kotzebue, after von "Voyage of Discovery in the South Sea, and to
Behring's Straits ... in the Ship Beutick" (abridged ed). London,
1821

P. 207

De Lours de Tones,
(at Guam) "In 1804 de Tones (the Vice-Governor of
the Marianas or Ladrones) undertook a voyage to the
Carolines, for the purpose of seeing his old friends, on
board the Maria of Boston, Capt. Ball, who,
having taken in provisions in Guam, was sailing,
with his super-cargo, Borman, for these islands.
Their intention was to collect Bicho de mer,
a species of large snails, without shell, which
are much sought after in the Chinese market.
The first cluster they touched upon was Ulla ...

Note: see if there is more on this subject in the text of
the 3 volume edition published in the same year.

Morrell, Benjamin. "A narrative of four voyages....." New York 1832.

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P.401. "The learned and scientific Doctor Pascalis, after I returned from this my fourth voyage, wrote an article for the public papers, in which he describes it in the following words:-

"It is that mollusca from the Indian Seas which is known in commerce by the French name bouche de mer (a nice morsel from the sea). If I am not much mistaken, the celebrated Cuvier calls it gasteropeda pulmonifera. It is abundantly gathered in the coasts of the Pacific Islands, and gathered especially for the Chinese market, where it commands a great price, perhaps as much as their much-talked-of 'edible birds' nests,' which are probably made up of the gelatinous matter picked up by a species of swallow from the body of these molluscae. They have no shell, no legs, nor any prominent part, except an absorbing and an excretory, opposite organs: but by their elastic rings, like caterpillars or worms, they creep in shallow waters; in which, when low, they can be seen by a kind of swallow, the sharp bill of which, inserted in the soft animal, draws a gummy and filamentous substance, which, by drying, can be wrought into the solid walls of their nest. Hence the name of gasteropeda pulmonifera."

This mollusca is oblong, and of different sizes, from three to eighteen inches in length; and I have seen a few that were not less than two feet long. They are nearly round, a little flattish on one side, which lies next the ground, or bottom of the sea; and they are from one inch to eight inches thick. They crawl up into shallow water at particular seasons of the year, probably for the purpose of gendering, as we often find them in pairs. It is when the sun has the most power upon the water, rendering it tepid, that they approach the shore; and often into places so shallow, that on the tide's receding they are left dry on the coral reef, exposed to the heat of the sun. But they do not bring forth their young in shallow water, as we never see any of their progeny; and the full-grown ones are always seen coming in from deep water. They feed principally on that class of zoophytes which produce the coral.

The biche-de-mer is generally taken in three or four feet water; after which they are taken to the shore, where they are split at one end with a knife, the incision being one inch or more, according to the size of the mollusca. Through this opening the entrails are forced out by pressure, and they are much like those of any other small tenant of

the deep. The article is then washed, and afterward boiled to a certain degree, which must not be too much nor too little. They are then buried in the ground for four hours; then boiled again for a short time, after which they are dried, either by the fire or the sun. Those cured by the sun are worth the most; but where one picul ($133\frac{1}{3}$ lb.) can be cured that way, I can cure thirty picul by the fire. When once properly cured, they can be kept, in a dry place, for two or three years, without any risk; but they should be examined once in every few months, say four times a year, to see if any dampness is likely to affect them. A picul, according to the Chinese weight, is $133\frac{1}{3}$ lb. avoidupois.

The Chinese, as before stated, consider biche-de-mer a very great /402/luxury; believing that it wonderfully strengthens and nourishes the system, and renews the exhausted vigour of the immoderate voluptuary. The first quality commands a high price in Canton, being worth ninety dollars a picul; the second quality, seventy-five dollars; the third, fifty dollars; the fourth, thirty dollars; the fifth, twenty dollars; the sixth, twelve dollars; the seventh, eight dollars; and the eighth quality only four dollars per picul. Small cargoes, however, will often bring more in Manilla, Singapore, and Batavia. "

BECHE-DE-MER

Shepherd, J. "Austral-Asia" *The Australian Geographer*, Vol III,
no 4 (May, 1938), pp. 3-15.

13 "The development of the trawling fishery by the settlers was hampered in much the same way as that of the sealing industry." "A great demand in China - Nalays prices had collected on N coast of Australia for many years (possibly centuries) before Elanders came.

Flinders found Nalays in G. of Carpentaria in 1803 & was impressed by commercial possibilities for Elanders. He suggested to Banks that if the E.I. Co. could establish a settlement in the northern part of New Holland, G-de-N would be a likely article of trade, since it seemed to bring to the Nalays "a good many thousand dollars annually from the Chinese" [HRNSW V:78]

significant that in thinking of ce. dev. of these lands F did think immediately of the E.I. Co. [14] This part of New Holland to him and others part of East Indies [For a detailed discussion of early relations between N coast of Aust & E Indies see Howard, Dixon, "English Activities in the North Coast of Australia" Proc.

Bêche-de-mer, contd

R. G. S. of Australia, South Aust Branch, xxx: 131 et seq.]

B-de-m also found near Sydney thru wreck of HMS 'Porpoise' in 1803 on Garner Reef. A private salvage expedition brought back iron from wreck plus a considerable quantity of b-de-m. Gov King impressed by flavour of "this delicious dish" and by commercial possibilities of b-de-m fishing - idea of selling b-de-m at Carter at £50 per ton attracted him

See Joseph Banks also interested and in B. Rowland Coll. there are some rough jottings by him headed "Commerce of New South Wales. Trade questions, 1798-05"

One of the notes headed "Intercourse with China, &c" it he suggests that quantities of b-de-m might be taken to China in colonial ships, which did return with Chinese goods and Chinese labourers.

But E.I Co restrictions prevented trade from becoming more than a trickle. Settlers dependent on East India Co for a means of exporting the b-de-m they collected - intolerable

Becke - de - neu, cont'd.

delays - American competition (not subject to E.I. Co. restrictions)

The Beche-de-mer Trade

- (1) Early efforts to establish beche-de-mer trade unsuccessful. Not commencing until after 1830.
- (2) Existence in Fiji known since sandalwood days.
- (3) Despite difficulties of native relations Americans began trade between 1825 and 1829.
- (4) Perhaps from 3 to 8 or 10 ships a year engaged in trade during 1830s. Carried on year to year without a break, one ship returning 5 or 6 times during the decade.
- (5) Gradually it became more firmly established and by 1835 well settled forming at Levuka of respectable Europeans carrying living as interpreters to visiting ships.
- (6) At end of 1830s Americans about to appoint one as vice-consul.
- (7) Mode of operation, - selection of site - visit of local chief - fet-house, better-house & trade house - array of wares - prices low but rise in 30s - including trading in tortoise-shell and sandalwood.
- (8) Profits great but also profits - £3 - £5 a piece in Nambla or Canton worth £3,000 to £6,000 for a cargo + tortoise-shell at 30/- a lb. or more + sandalwood.

¹ From "Development of Pacific Trade 1791-1817" and "Trade and Settlement in the Tropical Islands 1820-1840".

The Beche-de-mer Trade.

References

- (1) Early efforts - HRA, I, V, 8; 3, III, 463; 1, V, 721; in *Thames & Water*, 81, 129, 207.
 - (2) Date of commercial feasibility from Dallas's statement 59, 3.3.25; and Oliver & Dix, 25-37, giving further in 1829 - (3).
 - (3) Oliver & Dix, *passim*; Wilkes, III, 218-222, 357; Paine, "The Ships and Sailors of Old Salem", 374-398 - (4).
 - (4) Wilkes, III, 47 ff. - (6).
 - (5) Oliver & Dix, *passim*; Wilkes, III, 50, 208-222, 261 - (7).
 - (6) Fa Dargos - 1834 "Annie Josephine" narrative Du Petit-Thouars, "Voyage autour du monde...", II, 443 ff.; Dumont d'Urville, "Voyage du Pole Sud et dans l'Océanie...", IV, 172 ff.; "Charles Doygett" narrative 1834, Wilkes, III, 103-5, 290; 1838 "Sir David Ogilby" attack, HRA, I, XIX, 485 ff.; Wilkes, III, 295 ff. - (8).
 - (7) Fa profits - Oliver & Dix, 44, 82; Wilkes, III, 221-2, 261; Melbair, "Greatest Commerce...", II, 491.
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- (3) "Beche de mer fishing in Narrative of the U.S. Exploring Expedition, 3 1845 Wilkes, Adm C
- (4) "Beches de mer ou tréfang in "Tahiti et les établissements français de l'Océanie" Senat, L. G 989 5 5
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- (9) Dutton, S W "Tréfang fishing in Fiji" Mid-Pacific Mag ^{Oct 7,} 1922, Pt. 372-4.
- (10) Federal Council of Australasia. An Act to regulate the Pearl Shell and Beche-de-mer Fisheries in Australasian waters adjacent to the Colony of Queensland, 1888, with Order in Council and Proclamation by Governor

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Ht 1099-1105.

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- (12) Koningberger, J. C. "Tufang en Tufangvisserij in Nederlandsch-Indie Bataria, G. Kolff, 1904. Ht [2], 72, pl 9, cm 26. (Mededeelingen uit 'slands Plantentuin 71).
- (13) "Pêche des Holothurico ou Tufans" in "Voyage de découvertes aux Terres Australes, 1800-1804". V. 2. Peron, F. A.
- (14) "Prawing and prawning beach la mer" in "Voyages round the world" Fanning, E.
- (15) Roughley, T. C. "Beche-de-mer industry", in his "Wonders of the Great Barrier Reef", Ht 239-242.
- (16) Stendale, H. B. "Memoranda on some of the South Sea Islands". 1874.
- (17) Suter, G. H. "Adventures of a tufang fisher ... of Northern Australia". 1937. Ill. not.
- (18) Thursday Island, the beche-de-mer industry. Newstaper cuttings, v 52, Ht 192-3.
- (19) Tufang in "Mary Lea", 1867 ... M, J K. 980M

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- (4) ~~Thomas~~ Forrest, Thomas "a Voyage from Calcutta to the Margu archipelago" (London 1792), p 82-3.
- (5) Flinders, Matthew "a Voyage to Terra Australis" (London, 1814), II, p 147, 171-3, 183, 213, 228-33, 257, 345.
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(London 1837), p. 390, 433, 436.
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