



Shells on a Desert Shore: Mollusks in the Seri World

Cathy Moser Marlett. 2014. University of Arizona Press, Tucson. 304 pp. \$75.00 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-0-8165-3068-7.

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The oceans have played a vital role in sustaining human communities since the pre-neolithic era (Marean et al. 2007). Currently, global annual consumption of seafood amounts to an impressive 107 million tons a year (Laurenti 2007). Humans have also used marine biota as a source of weapons, tools, adhesives, tanning materials, pigments, adornment, musical instruments, recreation supplies, storage items, shelter, fuel, and medicines (Narchi 2011). There are few societies in the Americas in which marine ethnobiological knowledge is as vibrant and self-evident as that of the Seri people of coastal Sonora, Mexico. The Seri are the southernmost nomadic hunter-gatherer and fishing society in North America. Having roamed much of the Midriff Island area of the Sonoran Desert for at least 2000 years, their culture is characterized by a seafaring tradition, an extensive use of marine resources, and an overall reservoir of ethnobiological knowledge not commonly found in hunter-gatherer literature.

Many talented researchers, including Alfred L. Kroeber, Richard Felger and Gary Nabhan, have worked among the Seri. Yet I cannot think of someone as knowledgeable of Seri affairs as author Cathy Moser Marlett. Daughter of two linguistic experts on the Seri language, Cathy has spent long seasons in the Seriland since her early childhood not only speaking the language, developing friendships, and experiencing Seri culture as it evolves (see Moser Marlett 2000), but also meeting with many researchers from diverse disciplines who were hosted by her parents, making her a quintessential participant observer from an early age. All of these experiences and acquired skills have helped Cathy give us a remarkable book on Seri ethnomalacology. The book is divided into three sections, eight appendices and a foreword by desert ethnobotanist Richard S. Felger.

Part I, “The Settings,” invites readers to get to know and familiarize themselves with Seri culture, language, and territory. In addition, Part I offers a brief section on the author’s background, information resources and data, Seri traditional knowledge, and technical notes. Part II, “Mollusks in the Seri Culture,” is perhaps the most robust in terms of how the information is synthesized and presented. Here, the reader plunges directly into Seri ethnomalacology thanks to the vivid description of numerous biocultural roles that mollusks play within Seri culture. Starting with a brief explanation of the Seri way of naming living kinds, Moser Marlett makes it clear that many of the taxonomic categories are covert and that Seri do not name mollusks as a single taxonomic unit. The most valuable asset of this section is, without question, the intimate understanding of Seri ways of naming. Seri ethnotaxonomies may not be very descriptive or structured, but are full of remarkably sharp ethological descriptions. When the reader becomes aware that *hant quixooa* [what plans to fight] is the Seri name for hermit crabs, he can only marvel on the profound ecological and intra-specific observations behind such a name. Part II deals with taxonomy and anatomy and subtly incorporates daily life aspects—mythology and folklore, magical practices and mortuary rituals, medicine, food, material culture, trade and commerce, and place names—in which mollusks play a part in Seri life. It is a thorough and comprehensive section, yet also an easy to follow ethnography. Part III, “Species Accounts,” is perhaps the most attractive and conspicuous section. Illustrated with many pictures and remarkable drawings, most of which are the author’s work, the section groups all of the mollusks known by the Seri into classes—Bivalvia, Gastropoda, Polyplacophora, Scaphoda, and Cephalopoda—then discusses the ethnomalacology of each of the species included in every class. The



section expands, details, and particularizes every aspect of Seri ethnomalacology introduced in Part II, and it does so for each of the species included in the volume. I dare to say that if one would be willing to take this volume to the beach, species' illustrations are so vivid and accurate that it could easily be used for field classification.

In a digital era, when all books can be scanned into a single PDF file, Roberto Calasso (2013) has argued for the vital importance of personalized book covers: seductive images that can create a link between a given author and a diversity of readers. In this regard, the University of Arizona Press has chosen the perfect image for the book's dust jacket. The elderly and tanned hands of Victoria Astorga showing her shell-made pottery tools generate excitement and curiosity without giving away the contents of the book.

One thing I find problematic is the feeling that the full potential of the book has not been appreciated by a wider readership. Critical praises in the back panel refer to the book as "Essential reading for everyone interested in the Seri" (E.A. Anderson) and "... definitive work on Seri mollusks, a subject scarcely scratched by earlier Southwest ethnographers" (A.M. Rea). While absolutely true, these praises fall short in that the significance of this volume goes beyond the Seri or even the Southwest. First and foremost, the volume represents a substantial addition to the limited literature on ethnomalacology worldwide; a meager 24 results can be obtained from a search using Google Scholar, Web of Science and the University of Georgia's GIL database (Narchi 2011). Second, it contributes to the developing body of knowledge dealing with non-fisheries marine ethnobiology.

Third, it adds evidence against those views that consider hunter-gatherer ethnomedicinal systems to be limited and unsophisticated. Lastly, it is a material example from which Seri people can derive a sense of pride in their culture, knowledge, identity and territory. This book represents the accomplishment of a life's observations and intimate exchange of ideas with Seri collaborators and it surely is an important contribution to ethnobiology as a discipline.

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