The ‘brilliant shells’ of Shark Bay: the emotions of shell-collecting

Shino Konishi[1]

On his second visit to Australia William Dampier visited Shark Bay in August 1699. Here he discovered an array of familiar shellfish such as ‘mussels, periwinkles, limpets, oysters, both of the pearl kind and also eating-oysters, as well the common sort as long oysters’. Dampier also collected ‘an infinite number of highly extraordinary and beautiful shells’, in a wide ‘variety of colour and shape, most finely spotted with red, black, or yellow, etc., such as [he had] not seen anywhere but at this place’. He eagerly ‘brought away a great many of them’, but later lamented that he ‘lost all except a very few, and those not of the best’ quality.[2]

Dampier’s short account of the shells he found in Shark Bay tantalized the French zoologist, François Péron, who accompanied the Baudin expedition (1800-1804) which visited Western Australia in 1801 and 1803. Péron was determined to find and collect these ‘extraordinary and beautiful shells’ himself when he first visited Shark Bay in June 1801. His account of shell collecting is laden with emotional terms, charting the elation and disappointment he experienced while collecting. Although Péron’s account was unusually verbose, he was not alone in evoking emotional terms in describing shell collecting. Moreover, such accounts must be read in conjunction with the affective language used by early European explorers, particularly the French, to describe the Western Australian landscapes and seascapes more generally. These early naturalists’ accounts suggest that we read collecting as an emotional practice.

Monique Scheer describes ‘emotional practices’ as the ‘habits, rituals and everyday pastimes that aid us in achieving a certain emotional state’. She argues that

---

[1] This work was supported by the Australian Government through the Australian Research Council (project CE1101011 and project LP160100078). I would like to thank the editors, anonymous readers and participants at the *Histories of Natural History Collections & Collecting* symposium for their feedback on earlier drafts.

[2] William Dampier, *Voyage to New Holland, &c. in the Year, 1699* (London: James Knapton, 1703), 3: 125.

emotions are a ‘practice’ in order to highlight that emotions do not just reflect our body’s affective responses to action or stimulation, for example blushing or physically reddening when we feel embarrassed or shaking and quivering when we are frightened. Instead, Scheer insists emotions also *do* work, and provide a ‘practical engagement with the world’.[3] Thus Scheer emphasizes that we do not just *have* emotions, but we also *do* emotions, meaning that emotions emerge from bodily dispositions that are conditioned by social contexts which have their own cultural and historical specificity. So, while feelings may be spontaneous, they are also conventional, shaped by social relations and cultures.

This article will explore the emotions of natural history collecting, highlighting how emotions contribute to the practical way in which collectors made sense of the new world. More specifically I want to explore how emotions shaped and tempered the emerging knowledge of not only Western Australian mollusks, but also of the Shark Bay region. This location has a unique history because it is where the first European landing in the western half of the continent took place in 1616, and it was visited by a series of Dutch, British and French explorers who often reviled it as disappointing, monotonous, and sterile.[4] In contrast, much like the ‘brilliant shells’ that gleamed in Shark Bay’s waters, reefs and beaches, the explorers’ accounts of how they felt while shell-collecting provides significant relief to their broader evaluations of the area.

Aboriginal shell collecting in Shark Bay

Jane Balme and Kate Morse observe that humans have been collecting and adorning themselves with shells for up to 92,000 years, and that such ornaments are seen as a ‘hallmark of modern human behaviour’. Personal bodily adornments can be used to ‘communicate social identity, such as group membership, gender or marital status or a

[3] Monique Scheer, “Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (And is That What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bourdieuian Approach to Understanding Emotion,” *History and Theory* 51, no. 2 (2012): 209 and 193.

[4] See Sue Broomhall, “Emotional Encounters: Indigenous Peoples in the Dutch East India Company’s Interactions with the South Lands,” *Australian Historical Studies* 45, no. 3 (2014): 350-67.

state of being such as grief, marriage, marriage availability or some combination of these'.[5] In Western Australia, shells have been used for symbolic purposes for millennia, and were transported from coastal areas into the hinterlands as early as 40,000 years ago.[6] Shell beads found at the Mandu Mandu rock shelter, just 450 kilometers north of Shark Bay, were dated to 32,000 years BP. Made from cone shells (most likely *Conus dorreensis*), these beads were made by perforating the apex, and hollowing out the internal structure. Notches worn into the shell suggested they were then deliberately threaded onto a string. Cone shells, usually found on reef platforms, are one of the most diverse species found in Australia. Balme and Morse suggest that their pattern and colour made them just as aesthetically desirable thousands of years ago as they are today.[7]

It has been suggested that Aboriginal people developed an extensive shell 'industry', although, as Michael McCarthy explains, they:

> took only enough for their ceremonial and limited trading needs, exchanging shell with their neighbours as far inland as the Gibson Desert and then, much later, with the Macassan trepangers who began to frequent our northern shores in the 18th century.[8]

Drawing on Kim Ackerman, Ronald Moore explains that Aboriginal people 'harvested shell by walking on exposed reefs during low equinoxial tides', and some examples suggest that their collecting practice had a ritual element, as the 'spirit of the bower bird, a collector with good eyesight, was called upon' to aid the collectors in finding shells. Shells were also used in ceremonies and rituals, such as initiations,

---

[5] Jane Balme and Kate Morse, "Shell beads and social behaviour in Pleistocene Australia," *Antiquity* 80 (2006): 799-801.

[6] See Kim Ackerman, "The esoteric and decorative use of bone, shell and teeth in Australia," in *The Archaeology of Portable Art: Southeast Asian, Pacific and Australian Perspectives,* ed. Michelle C. Langley, Duncan Wright, Mirani Litster and Sally K. May (New York: Routledge, 2018), 204-6.

[7] See also Péron's description of the cone shell. Balme and Morse, "Shell beads and social behaviour in Pleistocene Australia,":803-5, and Péron, *Voyage of Discovery to Southern Lands,* 98.

[8] Michael McCarthy, "The collectors," *Historic Environment* 14, no. 1 (1998): 14.

healing practices, and the execution of law.[9] Angelos Chaniotis observes that 'rituals are emotionally loaded activities', explaining that they are social practices 'regulated' by certain 'norms' and shaped by 'the emotions of the participants' during the performance of the rituals.[10] Thus, collecting shells for ceremonial and adornment purposes suggests that it was also an emotional practice for Aboriginal people.

Traditionally known as Gutharraguda or 'two waters' by the local Malgana people, Shark Bay comprises an area of some 13,000 square kilometres located between the 25th and 27th latitudes and 113th and 115th longitudes. It has a semi-arid climate, with the rain falling mainly in the winter months, May to July, and it seems that the availability of fresh water has made permanent occupation difficult. The landscape comprises 'undulating sandy hills' covered in scrub, mainly acacia and spinifex, and relatively few animals. The marine environment, in contrast, is rich, abundant with sharks, turtle, dugong, fish, crustaceans, and of course shellfish.[11]

Shark Bay is recognized as the Country of three language groups: the Malgana, Nhanda, and Yingkarta peoples. The region was first inhabited between 18,000 and 30,000 years ago, and again between 6000 and 7000 years ago, with the current occupation beginning 2300 years ago. Aboriginal people have moved in and out of the area over millennia, depending on changing sea levels and evolving ecologies.[12] Throughout all of these periods of occupation marine shellfish and shells were important to the Aboriginal people of the region. Shell middens, dated to almost 7000 years BP, often included baler, turban, oyster, trochus, and chiton shells, and a

---

[9] Ronald Moore, "The Management of the Western Australian Pearling Industry, 1860 to the 1930s," *The Great Circle* 16, no. 3 (1994):124.

[10] Angelos Chaniotis, "Rituals between Norms and Emotions: Rituals as Shared Experience and Memory," in *Ritual and Communication in the Graeco-Roman World,* ed. Eftychia Stavrianopoulou (Liege: Centre international d'étude de la religion grecque antique, 2006), 211-214.

[11] Sandra Bowdler, "Before Dirk Hartog: Prehistoric Archaeological Research in Shark Bay Western Australia," *Australian Archaeology* 30 (1990): 48.

[12] "Aboriginal Heritage," *Shark Bay World Heritage*, accessed May 7, 2019, https://www.sharkbay.org/culture-history/aboriginal-heritage/ () and Bowdler, "Before Dirk Hartog," 48.

number also contain mudwhelk (*terebralia*) that were only found in mangroves which disappeared about 4000 years ago.[13] Sue O'Connor suggests that shellfish consumption in Shark Bay eased off in the mid to late Holocene, because in the last 1000 years rocky reef shell species were only used occasionally, and more non-edible species were found in middens, suggesting that from that time shell were mainly used for non-dietary purposes.[14] A fragment of baler shell found at the Silver Dollar site on the west coast of Péron Peninsula was dated to more than 18 000 BP, leading archaeologist Sandra Bowdler to speculate that it might have been a trade item, and 'well-developed inland economies might well have been in place in northwest Australia by 25,000 BP or earlier'.[15]

When colonists moved into the area in the 1850s, shell took on a new, more ominous, significance for the Malgana, Nhanda and Yingkarta people. The first colonial foray into the region was in 1850, when the *Champion* sailed north from Perth 'to examine Shark's Bay' and investigate 'its capabilities for yielding a constant supply of our present and probable future exports — such as guano, pearl oysters, &c'.[16] The first colonists to harvest pearl shells in Western Australia were pastoralists with the Denison Plains Pastoral Company who settled at Cossack, approximately 900 kms north of Shark Bay. After observing Aboriginal people from Nickol Bay collect pearl shells during low tide, they eagerly followed suit but soon depleted the shell beds through dredging. In 1868 pastoralists took local Aboriginal people offshore so they could dive for shell in deeper water, up to 10 meters, without any equipment. This soon became 'a vile industry'; as McCarthy explains, pearlers resorted to 'violence, murder, starvation and the marooning of men and women on offshore islands' to coerce Aboriginal people to dive for pearls and 'prevent their escape

---

[13] Sandra Bowdler, "The Silver Dollar Site, Shark Bay: an interim report," *Australian Aboriginal Studies,* no. 2 (1990): 60-2, and Sue O'Connor, "Where are the Middens? – An Overview of the Archaeological Evidence for Shellfish Exploitation Along the Northwestern Australian Coastline," *Indo-Pacific Prehistory Assocation Bulletin* 15, no. 2 (1996): 167-8.

[14] O'Connor, "Where are the Middens?" 167-8.

[15] Bowdler, "The Silver Dollar Site, Shark Bay," 62.

[16] "Local Intelligence," *The Inquirer*, October 23, 1850.

during the season'.[17] In 1871 this exploitation of Aboriginal people, especially women, led to the introduction of 'An Act to regulate the hiring and service of Aboriginal Natives engaged in Pearl Shell Fishing'.[18] That very same year a colonial pearling industry was established in Shark Bay, when Charles Edward Broadhurst applied for the first lease to harvest shells from Wilyah Miah, the Malgana term for 'shell place'.[19] Here they harvested the *Meleagrina margaritifera* oyster, which produced a smaller, golden pearl. Again, it was pastoralists who practiced pearling, and relied on Aboriginal labour which was remunerated in tobacco.[20] Sally McGann suggests that Shark Bay Aboriginal people may have had more agency than those at Cossack, as they seemed to have more freedom of movement, and more willingness to be involved in pearling. However, by 1876 'black birding' was also reported in Shark Bay when Aboriginal divers were kept on Faure Island so they could be forced to work again the following season.[21]

Today, pearl shell continues to play a role in Aboriginal cultural and economic self-determination in Shark Bay. For example, Malgana artist Jimmy Poland intricately carves pearl shell sculptures, a practice passed down from his father which affirms that his indigenous identity is grounded in Gutharraguda country.[22]

---

[17] McCarthy, "The collectors," 45.

[18] This was repealed and replaced in 1873 with the Pearl Shell Fishery Regulation Act (WA).

[19] Sally McGann, "Wilyah Miah," (M. Sc., University of Western Australia, 1999), 19.

[20] In 1873 the Brisbane Courier reported on the difficulties of pearling in Shark Bay, and the use of Aboriginal labour: 'pearlers have to work very hard, and, I might add, ought to be men with-out nostrils, for the pits, with their rotting, rotten, and seething tubs and tanks of shelled oysters, may be perceived truly from afar. Sickness to some extent prevails among whites, blacks, and Malays.' It was recommended that pearlers bring 'plenty of tobacco down to fee the blacks for the tedious occupation of opening shells, … and a blackfellow is a fine judge of good tobacco; anyone coming here ought to bring the best quality with him'. "Intercolonial News," *The Brisbane Courier*, November 19, 1873.

[21] McGann, "Wilyah Miah," 18-20.

[22] "Pieces Of Gutharraguda (Shark Bay): Jimmy Poland," *Form*, accessed May 16, 2019, https://archive.form.net.au/project/pieces-of-gutharraguda/.

A Western mania for shells

While shells have undoubtedly been important to the Aboriginal people of Shark Bay for millennia, shells were also significant in western culture, particularly in the seventeenth through to the nineteenth centuries, the period when European explorers sporadically visited Shark Bay. As David Allen notes, 'Shells first became … the subject of an elegant pursuit in seventeenth-century Netherlands'.[23] Their appeal to collectors lay in the fact that:

> shells came in a gratifying assortment of shapes and colours, many were pleasing to the eye and some even beautiful; they were obtainable from all corners of the globe, [and] for many of them only rarely and only with great difficultly; a beginner could start with a presentable array, put together by his own unaided efforts with without any expenditure of money, while for the connoisseur there was a challenging hinterland of scarcity, conferring monetary value accordingly.[24]

Furthermore, shells could be painted, allowing sophisticated Europeans to embellish their aesthetic appeal as a means of demonstrating their cultured personal taste. This shell-collecting vogue was dubbed *conchyliomanie* by French philosopher Jean Jacques Rousseau, and by the close of the eighteenth century, wealthy elites across Europe proudly displayed their collections.[25] Jessica Priebe suggests that European *conchyliomanie* peaked in the mid-eighteenth century, when 'some shell collectors paid more for highly sought after specimens than art collectors paid for works by da Vinci [and] Titian'.[26]

---

[23] David Allen, "Tastes and crazes," in *Cultures of Natural History,* eds. Nicholas Jardine, James A. Secord, and E.C. Spary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 395.

[24] Allen, "Tastes and crazes," 395.

[25] Allen, "Tastes and crazes," 395.

[26] Jessica S. Priebe, "*Conchyliologie* to *Conchyliomanie*: the Cabinet of Francois Boucher, 1703-1770," (Ph. D., University of Sydney, 2011), 15.

Collecting in general 'is usually understood as a private and impassioned pursuit', and Nicholas Thomas stresses that 'passionate curiosity is particularly crucial for the vocabulary of collecting.'[27] Tom Griffiths similarly argues that 'Collecting was a form of hunting', explaining that 'Naturalists and antiquarians, whether they were in pursuit of nature or culture, were inspired by the thrill of the chase and the identification and possession of a new specimen.'[28] Their emphasis on passion and excitement accords with the views of some psychologists, who see emotions as a core driver of acquisitiveness. American literary critic G. Thomas Tanselle explains that the usual rationales explaining collecting, such as a 'way of passing the time, or securing fame, or satisfying a love of beauty, or feeding one's self-importance, or taking financial risks, or amassing wealth, or following fashion', are not sufficient because each motive can be achieved by other means. Thus, for Tanselle collecting is a behaviour ultimately driven by emotional urges, even natural history collecting: 'the pleasure of amassing objects is increased by knowing that the activity supports scholarship, science, and art' for such accumulation provides a 'feeling of mastery'. This feeling 'is an emotional necessity', according to Tanselle, for 'we all are masters of the collections we surround ourselves with'.[29]

Arguably then, for the European naturalists who visited Shark Bay, shell-collecting was not just a scientific practice, but also an emotional practice. The feelings of anxiety stirred by the uncontrolled, unfamiliar and uncanny landscapes of Shark Bay, were allayed by the discovery, accumulation, and categorization of shells. Moreover, Shark Bay was a relatively unusual site of exploration in that it received visits from a number of different expeditions: Hartog in 1616, de Vlamingh in 1697, Dampier in 1699, Saint Alloüarn in 1772, Baudin in 1801 and 1803, Freycinet in

---

[27] Nicholas Thomas, "Licensed Curiosity: Cook's Pacific Voyages," in *Cultures of Collecting,* eds. John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), 116.

[28] Tom Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1996), 19.

[29] G. Thomas Tanselle, "A rationale of collecting," *Raritan* 19, no. 1 (1999): 23-50.

1818, and Denham in 1858.[30] Together these different expeditions led to the coalescence of ideas about Shark Bay's cartography, toponyms, and natural history, including its shells. This in turn shaped subsequent explorers' expectations and arguably their sense of emotional satisfaction and disappointment and urged them to discover and acquire more unique and unknown shell specimens.

Shark Bay's European Explorers

The skipper of the first European vessel to visit Western Australia, the *Eendracht*, was Dirk Hartog, who was also the second European to visit the continent, following fellow VOC captain Willem Janszoon, who landed in Cape York in 1606. Little is known of Hartog's stay at Shark Bay, only that he landed at what is now known as Cape Inscription on Dirk Hartog Island, from 25 to 27 October 1616 on his way to Bantam in the Dutch East Indies. As the whereabouts of his journals are no longer known it is not clear if he observed or collected any shells during his time there. He did, however, leave a pewter plate marking that he had landed, and Dirk Hartog Island was recorded as *t'Land Eendracht* on subsequent VOC maps from 1626.[31]

These maps were used by the next Dutch voyager to visit Shark Bay, Willem de Vlamingh, who arrived at 'Dirk Hartoogs roadstead' on 30 January 1697 during his expedition to the South Land in search of the missing VOC ship *Ridderschap van Holland.*[32] The crew of his ships *Geelvinck*, *Nijptangh* and *'t Wesltje* stayed in Shark Bay until 12 February, but did not record many details of their visit. The most

---

[30] For an overview of the European visits to Shark Bay see Hugh Edwards, *Shark Bay Through Four Centuries 1616 to 2000* (Denham, WA: Shark Bay Shire, 1999).

[31] Wendy Van Duivenvoorde, "Dutch Seaman Dirk Hartog (1583–1621) and His Ship *Eendracht*," *The Great Circle* 38, no. 1(2016): 1-31, and Robert J. King, "From 'Beach' To 'Western Australia': Dirk Hartog and the transition from speculative to actual geography," *The Great Circle* 38, no. 1(2016): 45-71.

[32] Willem de Vlamingh, "de Vlamingh's journal (journal A)," ARA, KA, VOC 1587, fols. 592r-688r, Gunter Schilder (trans.), reproduced in Günter Schilder, *Voyage to the Great South Land: Willem De Vlamingh 1696-1697,* C. De Heer (trans.), Royal Australian Historical Society, Sydney, 1985, 102-145: 133.

significant discovery they made there was Hartog's plate, which they removed, replacing it with another plate engraved with Hartog's original text on one side, and a testament of de Vlamingh's landing on the other.[33] The Dutch described the land as 'very dry and sandy and without trees'. The only aspect of the local environment that excited them was the abundance of fish and turtle to catch and eat rather than to collect and preserve: 'at night one can catch and turn over as many turtles as one likes, and get as many turtles' eggs as one desires'.[34] Although de Vlamingh's crew did not describe Shark Bay shells, they did collect some during their time in Western Australia, most likely during their stay at Shark Bay. Following de Vlamingh's arrival in Batavia, the VOC reported back to Amsterdam that he had collected 'a number of larger and smaller disks of wood', said to be 'odiferous', as well as a 'small bottle of the oil' distilled from wood, 'together with a box containing shells collected on the beach, fruits, plants, etc..'.[35]

The VOC was unimpressed with de Vlamingh's collection, deeming it 'of little value and decidedly inferior to what elsewhere in India may be found of the same description'. They concluded that de Vlamingh had 'found little beyond an arid,

[33] [Mandrop Torst], *Journaal wegens een voyagie, gedaan op order der Hollandsche Oost-Indische Maatschappy in de jaaren 1696 en 1697 door het hoekerscheepje de Nyptang, het schip de Geelvink, en het galjoot de Wezel, na het onbekende Zuid-land, en wyders na Batavia*, Willem de Coup, Willem Lamsvelt, Philip Verbeek, en Jan Lamsvelt, Amsterdam, 1701, Gunter Schilder (trans), reproduced in Schilder, *Voyage to the Great South Land,* 146-162: 159.

[34] They also reported observing 'birds [sic] nests of prodigious greatness, so that six men could not, by stretching out their arms, encompass one of them', though not the 'fowl' that inhabited them. See Willem de Vlamingh, "de Vlamingh's journal (journal A),"ARA, KA, VOC 1587, fols. 592r-688r, Gunter Schilder (trans.), reproduced in Schilder, Voyage to the Great South Land, 102-145: 134 and [Torst], *Journaal wegens een voyagie,* 159, and Nicolaes Witsen, "Extract from a Letter from Nicolaes Witsen to Dr Martin Lister, 3 October 1698," reproduced in Schilder, *Voyage to the Great South Land,* 221-2: 222.

[35] This wood was from *Callitris preissii* or Rottnest Island pine, which de Vlamingh's men had collected at Rottnest Island.

barren and wild land'.[36] Nicolaes Witsen, the VOC director who supported the expedition, was eventually sent the natural history specimens collected by de Vlamingh's men. As an enthusiastic naturalist and conchologist, he discerned treasures in the box of shells. 'Witsen was pleased with two Australian shells' he found, according to Eric Ketelaar, considering them 'hitherto not sufficiently known', and sent 1:2 scale drawings to eminent British physician and conchologist Martin Lister.[37] Lister used his *Historae Conchyliorum* (1685) to identify the two shells as a 'nautilus, and the other the concha persica clavicula radiata'.[38] It has long been said that these two shells – a nautilus and a conch - represent 'the first specimens of any kind' collected in Australia.[39]

In August 1699, Dampier arrived at Dirk Hartog Island, staying in Shark Bay for eight days. This was his second visit to Western Australia, on an expedition specifically aimed at exploring New Holland. He described a number of birds, reptiles, mammals, and sealife, most notably the 'abundance' of sharks which led him to name the area 'Shark's Bay'.[40] Although his most impassioned account was of the seashells he lamented losing. Dampier was followed by Louis de Saint Aloüarn, a French naval officer, who visited New Holland in 1772 after being separated from Yves-Joseph de Kerguelen. They had been tasked with discovering the unknown land,

---

[36] "Letter of the Governor General and Councillors to the Managers of the E.I.C. at the Amsterdam Chamber, November 30, 1697," reproduced in J. de Heeres, *The Part Borne by the Dutch in the Discovery of Australia 1606-1765* (London: Luzac & Co. 1899), 84.

[37] Eric Ketelaar, "Exploration of the archived world: from *De Vlamingh's Plate* to digital realities," *Archives and Manuscripts* 36, no. 2 (2008): 18, and Charles E. Nelson, "Nicolaas Witsen's letter of 1698 to Martin Lister about a Dutch expedition to the South Land (Western Australia): the original text and a review of its significance for the history of Australian natural history," *Archives of Natural History* 21, no. 2 (1994): 153.

[38] Nicolaes Witsen, "Extract from a Letter from Nicolaes Witsen to Dr Martin Lister, 3 October 1698," reproduced in Schilder, *Voyage to the Great South Land,* 221-2: 222 and Nelson, "Nicolaas Witsen's letter of 1698," 153.

[39] Ida Lee, *European Explorers in Australia* (London: Methuen and Co. 1925) [online], available at Project Gutenberg http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks03/0301141h.html accessed 11/05/19.

[40] Dampier, *Voyage to New Holland,* 124.

‘terra australis’, and Saint Aloüarn is best remembered for annexing New Holland on behalf of France during his short stay at Dirk Hartog Island.[41]

The Baudin Expedition’s shell-collecting

The most detailed account of the practice of shell collecting stems from Péron’s official journal of the Baudin expedition. This expedition was the most ambitious scientific expedition of the time, comprising two ships, the *Géographe* and the *Naturaliste*, and tasked with investigating Australia’s geography, natural history, and people. On 23 June 1801 the Baudin expedition sailed along the ‘arid, disagreeable and dreary’ looking Dirk Hartog Island, and on the evening of the 26th entered the northern entrance of Shark Bay.[42] As Péron gazed at the mainland he searched in vain for ‘any sign of a mountain, any semblance of a river, streams or even torrents’ but all he saw as a shore of ‘red or white sand’, and ‘no greenery apart from the dark green of a few widely-scattered, straggling, sickly bushes’. It was against the ‘hideous sterility of the mainland and islands’ that the ‘sea obligingly produced the most varied and numerous forms of life’. Peering into the water Péron was delighted to see great beds of ‘salpa, … medusae, beroes, and porpites’. He exclaimed that:

> the prodigious number of these creatures, their strange changing shapes, brilliant colours, supple movements and agile manoeuvrings, together formed an agreeable spectacle for all our companions, and for my friend Lesueur, my colleague Maugé, and me, such abundance was the cause of much pleasure and enthusiasm.[43]

---

[41] Philippe Godard and Tugdual de Kerros, *1772: The French Annexation of New Holland: The Tale of Louis de Saint Aloüarn,* trans. Odette Margot, Myra Stanbury, and Sue Baxter (Perth: Western Australian Museum, 2008).

[42] Nicolas Baudin, *The journal of post Captain Nicolas Baudin, Commander-in-Chief of the corvettes Géographe and Naturaliste, assigned by order of the government to a voyage of discovery*, trans. Christine Cornell, (Adelaide: Libraries Board of South Australia, 1974), 201.

[43] Péron, *Voyage of Discovery to Southern Lands,* 88.

On the 28 June 1801 the *Géographe* anchored near Bernier Island, and most of the crew went ashore. The captain, Nicolas Baudin, was concerned with finding enough food, and after the boatmen only caught about 100 fish, he 'contented [him]self with oysters and crabs, of which there was a plentiful supply'. Then during 'low tide' Baudin reported that they 'found some very beautiful turban-shells, a few common turriculate shells and a lovely "couronne d'Ethiope" with its fish, which is no doubt unknown in Europe'. They also collected some 'rather pretty mussels, several other ordinary shells and, above all, clams, off which the sailors had a good feast'.[44] Lieutenant-commander Pierre Bernard Milius was delighted to find a 'great variety of absolutely beautiful shell-fish', declaring that it was 'here that we began our conchological collection'.[45]

Rather than worrying about food, Péron marvelled over the different species of marine life he observed, declaring that 'there is possibly no country in the world with as many fish as Shark Bay'. In a detailed description of the mollusks he observed on the beach, he reported that these 'regions were richer in shellfish proper, but, with the exception of mussels and oysters, which enjoy life (so to speak) amongst the rocks and raging waves, they were all univalves'. Yet buried in the mud and sand he also discovered 'numerous magnificent bivalves':[46]

> Of all the species of mussels known so far, the one that I discovered [in Shark Bay] is incontestably the most beautiful. Stripped of its marine coating, it shines with the most vivid colours of the prism and precious stones; it is dazzling, if I may say so. I have described it by the name of Mytilus effulgens.[47]

---

[44] Baudin, *The journal of post Captain Nicolas Baudin*, 208.

[45] Pierre Bernard Milius, *Last Commander of the Baudin Expedition: The Journal (1800-1804),* trans. Kate Pratt, ed. Peter Hambly (Canberra: Kerry Stokes Collection and NLA Publishing, 2013), 76.

[46] Péron, *Voyage of Discovery to Southern Lands,* 97.

[47] This name, incidentally, was never adopted by the scientific community. Péron, *Voyage of Discovery to Southern Lands,* 98.

Péron also gave a detailed description of the local oyster, which despite its 'strange' appearance, was 'extremely delicate', and became everyone's favourite to eat. Turning to the univalve shellfish found in Shark Bay he listed:

> a beautiful species of trochus or turban shell, the most vivid and intense green in colour, a type of patella that [he] named gigantea on account of its size; a magnificent volute dotted with small white spots that look like so many little snow flakes, and above all, a cone shell or spiral about an inch and a half long, very light orange in colour and distinguished by a band, roughly three twelfths of an inch wide, which appears on each turn of the spiral and which, when the shellfish is very fresh, is the most dazzling lapis-blue'.[48]

He also reported that 'two species of terrestrial shellfish' - one a small helix, and the other belonging to the bulimus genus - 'covered large areas of the island's interior', though was disappointed to discover that most were dead.

Péron's desire to collect shells nearly cost him his life on two separate occasions, both within days of each other. The first was when he had been out collecting on 28 June when,

> carried away by my zeal and the pleasure of the important discoveries that I was (so to speak) making at every step, I extended my excursion to the south of the island. And soon got lost amongst the dunes and bushes.[49]

Yet rather than abandoning his precious specimens he chose to 'walk faster', unwittingly in the wrong direction, and eventually collapsed through 'weariness and hunger'. The next morning he heard gunfire, as his shipmates searched for him and managed to return to the ship with increased feelings of 'emotion and gratitude'.[50]

---

[48] Péron, *Voyage of Discovery to Southern Lands,* 98.

[49] Péron, *Voyage of Discovery to Southern Lands,* 100.

[50] Péron, *Voyage of Discovery to Southern Lands,* 100.

On 7 July while on an excursion to one of the Barren Islands, Péron 'found nothing of interest' so went down to the beach to pick up shells', first 'amus[ing] himself at the expense of the crabs' collecting 'about fifty of them' in his shirt.[51] But his main goal was a live univalve. He ventured out on a 'hazardous reef' and discovered a beautiful shell in a rocky crevice. Unfortunately, he was caught by a crashing wave while 'occupied in carefully detaching them from a rock'. Instantly his clothes and skin were shredded and he was 'covered in blood', yet he managed to cling to a rock to prevent being further swept out to sea, and dragged himself to shore where he again collapsed 'faint with pain and the loss of blood'. He didn't return to camp until midnight, again guided by the bonfire his crewmates lit as a beacon to guide him back to the ship.[52]

By this time all of their scientific work had been completed, and after a futile wait for the *Naturaliste*, the crew of the *Géographe* packed up and departed Shark Bay on 12 July 1801. They headed north towards Timor, before circling back and around to present-day Tasmania, Victoria, South Australia, Sydney, Albany, Geographe Bay, and then eventually returning to Shark Bay in mid-March 1803. This time Baudin's interests were not scientific, but instead to collect 'as many as possible of those great turtles which … covered the vast sand-bank of Hamelin pool' to sustain them on the long journey home.[53] After landing at the eponymous peninsula on 17 March 1803, Péron went to the shore the next day 'impatient to examine the brilliant shells there'. He observed that 'Dampier had already extolled their magnificence', quoting Dampier's lament at losing 'almost all of them'. Perhaps Péron drew comfort from knowing that the 'old navigator' had lost his shell collection, for the Baudin expedition had similarly lost 'almost the whole of [its] rich collections' to the British during its five months stay in Sydney. Despite Baudin's entreaties to Governor King,

---

[51] Baudin, *The journal of post Captain Nicolas Baudin*, 215.

[52] Péron, *Voyage of Discovery to Southern Lands,* 101-2.

[53] François Péron and Louis de Freycinet, *Voyage of Discovery to Southern Lands, Books IV, Comprising Chapters XXII to XXXIV,* 2nd ed. (1824), trans. C. Cornell (Adelaide: The Friends of the State Library of South Australia, 2003), 133.

the French naturalists suffered 'the pain of seeing this precious part of our acquisitions dispatched to England'.[54]

Determined to rebuild their shell collection Péron went to the water's edge, and was dismayed to find only 'dead shellfish', so he scampered over the dunes where he saw the 'whitish' shallows, 'so feared by sailors, but so precious to the conchologist'.[55] In describing the shallows Péron mused on the different types of shellfish he might find, and the particular coastal environments and ocean depths they usually inhabited. Unfortunately, however, he discovered that 'the wild shores were unable to furnish us with a single specimen', and he returned to the ship 'with a basketful of broken shells'.[56] After Baudin rejected his demand for a boat to take him to the eastern sandbanks Péron convinced the gardener Antoine Guichinot and artist Nicolas-Martin Petit to go ashore with him on 20 March and walk across the peninsula, which he guessed was only one league across in distance. After walking all morning without any food and water they crossed the peninsula, and Péron exclaimed 'all my presumptions became a certainty: we found those sand-banks, those gentle waters and those beautiful shellfish we had come to seek on that shore'.[57]

In this seemingly arcadian setting, so distinct from the prevailing European perceptions of Shark Bay's coast as barren and desolate, Péron was able to 'wade a long way out' and simply 'plunge [his] hand into the sand in order to pull out the most beautiful shells' while 'various shoals of fish swam fearlessly around us'.[58] After they had collected their shells and dried themselves a 'troop' of 14 Aboriginal men suddenly appeared at the top of a dune, and ran towards them shouting. Though terrified, the French trio tried to approach them 'with assurance', a 'manoeuvre [which] appeared to disconcert them', and the Aboriginal men eventually walked

---

[54] Péron and de Freycinet, *Voyage of Discovery to Southern Lands,* 135.

[55] Péron and de Freycinet, *Voyage of Discovery to Southern Lands,* 136.

[56] Péron and de Freycinet, *Voyage of Discovery to Southern Lands,* 144 and Baudin, *The journal of post Captain Nicolas Baudin*, 507.

[57] Péron and de Freycinet, *Voyage of Discovery to Southern Lands,* 144.

[58] Péron and de Freycinet, *Voyage of Discovery to Southern Lands,* 144.

away. Finally, 'loaded with the richest collections from these shores' Péron claimed that he and his companions 'congratulat[ed] [them]selves upon the happy outcome', and set off back across the peninsula. Yet, suffering from the 'distressing aridity' and lack of water, they eventually had to 'abandon the greater part of the rich collections that [Péron] had just acquired at the cost of so much devotion'.[59]

Baudin, upon hearing what happened, complained that they had 'brought back several [shells] that were exactly the same as those that the *Naturaliste* had already collected in great number', frustrated that they did not given up their collecting sooner to return to the boat. His annoyance was exacerbated when he learned that Guichenot had 'obligingly carried the whole way 25 to 30 pounds in weight of worthless shells that had been collected with as much pleasure as care by Citizen Péron', leaving the poor gardener 'sick with exhaustion'.[60] The difference between Péron's and Baudin's descriptions highlight the role of emotions in collecting. Baudin had not participated in their arduous hunt for shells, nor narrowly avoided a potentially fraught 'interview' with a group of Aboriginal men. Thus the more sober and rational Baudin could not account for how feelings of disappointment, elation, triumph, fear and loss would shape and drive Péron's collecting practice more than any rationalist scientific objectives nor desire to adhere to naval orders.

On 23 May 1803 the Baudin expedition weighed anchor and following the coast northwards to the Bonaparte Archipelago before making their way to Timor, and then back to France. They brought with them tens of thousands of natural history specimens collected from across Australia, though, of course not all of the Shark Bay shells they had actually collected, since they lost their first collection to the British in Port Jackson, and Péron had been forced to abandon his last collection. Given Baudin died on the return voyage, Péron worked with Louis-Claude de Saulces de Freycinet, an officer on the expedition, to prepare the official journal for publication up until his own death in 1810.

---

[59] Péron and de Freycinet, *Voyage of Discovery to Southern Lands,* 147.

[60] Baudin, *The journal of post Captain Nicolas Baudin*, 510.

Freycinet's shell-collecting

In 1816 Freycinet was commissioned to lead his own scientific expedition, circumnavigating the globe on the *Uranie* and *Physicienne* with the primary aim of establishing an observatory near Rio de Janeiro. Yet, despite its scientific objectives, perhaps remembering the frustration Baudin has felt towards his naturalists, Freycinet ensured that there were no scientists aboard, instead relying on naval surgeons Jean René Quoy and Joseph Paul Gaimard to serve as naturalists, and pharmacist Charles Gaudichaud Beaupré as botanist. Significantly, Freycinet also brought his wife Rose, initially disguised as a man, to accompany him. One of their first destinations was Dirk Hartog Island in Shark Bay. Their stay was intended to be brief, only 'a few days', so they could correct some bearings taken by the Baudin expedition, explore the eastern part of Hamelin Harbour which had not previously been visited, and catch turtles and fish to feed the crew.[61] Freycinet, also had a more personal reason for re-visiting Shark Bay. During Baudin's voyage he had landed on Dirk Hartog Island in 1801 and discovered de Vlamingh's pewter plate. While Freycinet believed they should take it back to France (just as de Vlamingh had taken Hartog's plate), the *Naturaliste's* captain Jacques Félix Emmanuel Hamelin thought it more honourable to return it where it was found. So upon his return to Shark Bay Freycinet was determined to recover the Dutch plate for France.

Like the European explorers before them, Freycinet's artist Jacques Arago, was struck with disappointment upon first sight of the coast, claiming it 'exhibited nothing but a picture of desolation; no rivulet consoled the eye, no tree attracted it; no mountain have variety to the landscape, no dwelling enlivened it: everywhere reigned sterility and death'. Just as Péron's account was laden with emotional language, so to was Arago's: 'beware of looking for any enjoyment; the search would be merely

[61] Joseph Paul Gaimard, "Gaimard's lost trousers: the journal account of a visit by the assistant surgeon of the *Uranie* to Shark Bay in 1818," trans. Paul Gibbard (Perth: State Library of Western Australia, 2014), 272-3; and Louis de Freycinet, *Voyage autour du monde: entrepris par ordre du roi ... exécuté sur les corvettes de S. M. l'Uranie et la Physicienne, pendant les années 1817, 1818, 1819 et 1820 ... Historique* (Paris: Chez Pillet aìné,1828), vol. 1, part 2: 454.

wasting your strength, without finding the least relief'.[62] While Gaimard also viewed Shark Bay as 'inhospitable', knowing that they 'would not find even the smallest trickle of fresh water', he was nonetheless excited to land. This was because they had a 'still' to desalinate the water.[63] Anticipating that they had overcome Shark Bay's primary obstacle, Gaimard reflected 'that they thought to themselves '"So that's New Holland … the land we have been dreaming about!". Our desires are set to be fulfilled'. Even though the area had been 'already explored', the naturalist believed that their 'anthropological and natural history excursions [were] set to become more fascinating'.[64] Freycinet's men clearly experienced a range of different emotions as they anticipated landing at Shark Bay, a seemingly desolate and remote place which, by then, had been visited by European explorers for over two centuries. Such mixed emotions would also shape their shell collecting practice.

For Freycinet's crew shell-collecting served as a means of alleviating boredom, evoked a sense of nostalgia and even provided moments of joy. Before arriving in Shark Bay, the expedition had visited European colonial settlements – Cape Town, Mauritius, Bourbon – where they attended markets and formal dinners. Shark Bay was the first place they visited that was, according to Marnie Bassett, 'simply its untouched primitive self'. On the six-week voyage from Bourbon to Shark Bay, Rose 'planned a programme of occupations to cheer herself', spending an hour each day practicing guitar, writing in her journal, studying English, and doing needlework. This program allowed her to pass time 'without getting bored'.[65] On 18 September Rose Freycinet accompanied her husband ashore, and they 'spent several days sleeping under a tent'. She lamented, however, that their 'stay on land was not as pleasant or fun, the country being entirely devoid of trees and vegetation. One could

---

[62] Jacques Arago, *Narrative of a Voyage Round the World in the Uranie and Physicienne Corvettes, commanded by Captain Freycinet During the Years 1817, 1818, 1819, and 1820 …* (London: Treuttel and Wurtz, Truettel, Jun. and Richter, 1823), 166.

[63] Gaimard, "Gaimard's lost trousers," 274.

[64] Gaimard, "Gaimard's Lost Trousers," 275.

[65] Marnie Bassett, *Realms and Islands: The world voyage of* Rose *de* Freycinet *1817-1820* (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), 83.

only go for a walk on burning sand'. So, she tried to replicate her shipboard program to alleviate her boredom in which shell-collecting played a significant role: 'When the heat died down a little, I could collect shells, of which I had an impressive collection. I spent the rest of the day in the tent reading or working'.[66] For the artist Arago shell-collecting provided a way of restoring his equilibrium after suffering the harsh conditions. On 15 September he volunteered to go ashore at Peron Peninsula, laughably ill-prepared: he wore only a straw hat for shade with a 'huge cow's horn' holding gun-powder which 'banged at [his] side', and carried 'a large tin box … filled with provision'.[67] He struggled trying to carry his equipment over gravelly hills covered in thorny shrubs, and even tried to chase down two cassowaries, so was soon 'fainting with fatigue'. Not being able to go any further, he 'resolved to employ [himself] during the rest of the day in collecting shells, of which the shore is covered'.[68] Shell-collecting not only allowed Arago to pass the time, just as it had Rose Freycinet, but it also allowed him to achieve a task and allay the humiliations of his first disastrous landing at Peron Peninsula.

Shark Bay's abundant oysters also triggered a sense of nostalgia amongst the French. Rose Freycinet noted one occasion in which they had had a 'healthy meal' comprising 'not just what we had brought from the ship, but also an excellent oyster which we found on the rocks'. She was delighted to find that the local 'oysters [were] far tastier than all those I had eaten, sitting at a table in comfort, in Paris'.[69] Freycinet himself also 'praised the exquisite taste of the Shark Bay oysters', and Gaimard exclaimed that the oysters had 'such a subtle flavour that the gastronomes of Cancale'

---

[66] Rose Marie de Freycinet, *A Woman of Courage: the journal of Rose de Freycinet on her voyage around the world 1817-1820,* trans. and ed. Marc Serge Rivière (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1996), 52.

[67] In his letter he told his friend 'You would have laughed at the singularity of my accoutrement'. Jacques Arago, *Narrative of a voyage round the world: in the* Uranie *and* Physicienne *corvettes, commanded by Captain Freycinet during the years 1817, 1818, 1819, and 1820; on a scientific expedition undertaken by order of the French government in a series of letters to a friend* (London: Treuttel, 1823),167-8.

[68] Arago, *Narrative of a voyage,* 168.

[69] Rose Marie de Freycinet, *A Woman of Courage,* 51.

(a town in Brittany, northwestern France, renowned for its oysters) ‘would not look down on it’.[70] For the Freycinets and Gaimard Shark Bay’s ‘abundant’ oysters reminded them not only of home, but also of the comforts of civilised life in France, perhaps providing a brief reprieve from the unfamiliar landscape of Shark Bay which was so alien to them.

Arago’s initial pessimism about Shark Bay’s environs deepened throughout his stay, and by 15 September he deemed it a ‘frightful abode’. He was particularly perturbed by the nights, as after sunset ‘everything [appears] dead’, and nothing ‘disturbs the silence of this melancholy solitude’. Yet, in the early morning his mood lifted as everyone busied themselves collecting their ‘store of oysters’. He reported a happy scene as ‘sailors … collected as many as them wished’ taking basketfuls to camp ‘where we lived without any regard to rank or station’.[71] The abundance of oysters not only provided a steady supply of food for the crew, which was always a cause of anxiety for explorers in unfamiliar lands, but also provided a luxurious staple that all were eager to enjoy.

Freycinet’s naturalists were successful in their natural history collecting, and during their short stay at Shark bay amassed a significant collection. This included four jars of crustacea and mollusc specimens preserved in spirits, and ‘three unknown molluscs with internal shells’ from Dirk Hartog Island.[72] The French Academy of Sciences – Humboldt, Cuvier, Des Fontaines, Gay-Lussac, Biot, De Rossel, Thenard - commended the scientific discoveries from Freycinet’s expedition, especially Quoy and Gaimard, who collected a significant number of ‘rare objects’:

> Among the mollusca and polypi are a great number of animals which inhabit shells, and which there has never yet been an opportunity of examining. They

[70] Freycinet, *Voyage autour du monde*, 480 and Gaimard, “Gaimard’s Lost Trousers,” 283.

[71] Arago, *Narrative of a voyage,* 173-4.

[72] Gaimard, “Gaimard’s Lost Trousers,” 286.

> have been very well preserved in spirits (such as large cones, cypraeas, volutes, astraeaes, tubiporas &c.) [73]

The Academy of Sciences concluded that this 'part of the collection of Captain Freycinet may be regarded as one of the most valuable acquisitions that has been made to the history of animals in modern times'.[74]

Conclusion

By focussing on European explorers' accounts of Shark Bay, I have tried to elucidate the role played by emotions in natural history collecting. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries natural history was understood in increasingly scientific terms, and explorers, as scientists in the field, were driven to discover, collect and name new species. Yet, shell-collecting was not just a scientific pursuit. Humans have collected these beautiful, lustrous, portable objects for millennia, not just as a delectable food source, but also to decorate, exchange, use in rituals, display their taste and erudition, and for the naturalists who ventured across oceans, to achieve acclaim through new discoveries. For the explorers discussed in this article, particularly the French, shell-collecting was evidently not just a scientific practice. In Shark Bay, so remote from Europe and uncanny in appearance, shell-collecting served as a way of providing emotional succour to the European explorers as a familiar and nostalgic touchtone to their lives back home in 'civilisation', or as a ritualised, methodical, and restorative activity to counter the anxieties, discomforts, and tedium of exploration.

[73] "Report Made to the Academy of Sciences," in Arago, *Narrative of a voyage,* xxii.

[74] "Report Made to the Academy of Sciences," in Arago, *Narrative of a voyage,* xxii.