

Tiger Cowry:

Cowry shells (leho in Hawaiian) are among the most beautiful and collected of all shells. Oval or globular in shape and often striking in color, they possess a shimmering luster that has drawn folks to harvest them from the sea for about as long as human memory. History records the use of cowries for currency, ornamentation, good luck and fertility charms, and as ceremonial or religious objects. The women of Pompeii wore cowry shells to prevent sterility. In the Fiji and Solomon Islands, the wearing of golden cowries symbolized power and rank.

The word “cowry” or “kauri” comes from India, where shells were used as money as early as 900 A.D. The Italian word “porcellana,” meaning “little white pigs,” described a type of cowry popular in that part of the world. From it came the word “porcelain.” Cowry shells taken from grave sites in Saxon Germany, prehistoric England, pre-dynastic Egypt, ancient China, Uganda and other parts of Africa, as well as what is now mainland America, provide evidence that cowry shells were much coveted — even revered — world-wide, by early civilizations.

Here in Hawaii, cowries were a food source. Hawaiians used the shells for scraping tools, octopus lures, and adornment. Queen Kapi’olani wore a lei of leho ‘uala or ivory-colored “sweet potato cowries” when she attended Queen Victoria’s 1887 jubilee.

Tiger cowry shells, the type used for lures, had to be the perfect color to tempt the discriminating he’e or octopus. They also had to carefully match the stone sinker with which they were paired. Shell and sinker, plus a bone hook, were lashed to a wooden shaft with triple-stranded cordage. Some shells first were smoked over a fire to achieve the coloration considered ideal for fishing at a particular time of day or evening.

Fishing for octopus with a cowry shell lure (ka lawaia luhee) was a skill passed down — along with successful lures — from one generation to another. A favorite lure might be named for a beloved relative or ancestor. Stories and chants memorialized lures that possessed special powers to attract octopus and squid. The most famous were said to be

so irresistible to their intended prey that they only had to be dangled over the side of a canoe and “squids came climbing in.”

Tiger cowries favor depths below ten feet. Hawaii can boast of producing the largest specimens in the world. Reaching six inches in length, these large tigers have become extremely rare due to over-collection. White with dark, leopard-like spots, the shells — like snowflakes — each have their own unique pattern. No two are exactly alike. Some have so many spots that they appear black in color. Most are some combination of orange, black and white.

As beautiful as a cowry shell may be, the animal inside is every bit as noteworthy. Unlike other shell-bearing molluscs, the cowry possesses a mantle it can spread over its own outer shell to protect it. This singular ability is what produces the smooth, glossy finish so distinctive of all cowries. The tiger cowry’s mantle is dark gray and mottled with pointy, white-tipped papillae. The mantles of other cowries are just as unique — and some are even more spectacular than their shells. Each has its own base color, such as red, yellow, or black, combined with some variation of papillae colors.

Most cowries hide beneath coral or in cracks and crevices during the day and only come out at night. Some are vegetarians, while others dine on sponges and other animals. Breeding pairs usually remain in one area for their entire lives. Once a male has fertilized a female, she lays eggs on the substrate and sits on them like a nesting bird for up to four weeks. The eggs hatch into drifting planktonic veligers that eventually settle to the bottom and become juveniles called bullae. Distinguishing them from any other type of snail at this point is difficult. Gradually, they develop shells that wrap completely around their soft bodies and have a slit-like, toothed aperture common only to cowries.

Thirty-five of the 200 known cowries in the world come from Hawaii. Nine of these exist nowhere else. So prized are some species that they may be endangered long before appearing on an official list. It is one thing to find an empty seashell on a beach and take it home as a keepsake. It is quite another to remove a shell with a living inhabitant from

the ocean itself on the false assumption that taking just one to keep — or a couple dozen to sell — won't matter much. Taking too many is how so many species have already become rare and possibly extinct. Resist the temptation to remove shells from a tide pool or reef, and if the surf dumps a treasure at your feet, put it back where it belongs. Its owner may not yet have vacated.