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Oman

Sea Shells

Written by John Lawton

In the 1950s, Dr. Donald Bosch, one of the very few surgeons in Oman, had people lining up outside his tiny operating theater at the American hospital in Matrah. On some occasions he would treat more than 200 patients and perform up to 10 operations in a single day - in difficult conditions and with little trained help.

The pressure, obviously, was intense. So Dr. Bosch forced himself to relax by walking regularly along nearby beaches with his wife and, as a result, took up a hobby that has since made him an international authority on the seashells of Oman.

"It all started because of those walks along the beach," says Dr. Bosch, now chief medical officer at the modern Khoula Hospital with more than 60 doctors working under him. "We just couldn't help noticing the staggeringly beautiful shells all around us."

Thinking these shells might be of interest to experts - since Oman was then largely unknown to the West- Dr. Bosch wrote to the American Museum of Natural History asking if they might be interested in seeing some specimens. The answer, to his surprise, was a cable: yes, the museum was *very* interested. A letter quickly followed with instructions on how to collect and ship the shells to New York, and shortly after letters began to arrive from museums and universities as far away as New Zealand, South Africa and Japan, also asking for shells.

So began a quarter of a century of beachcombing for Dr. Bosch, during which the American physician and his family collected, classified and sent off, wrapped in newspapers, thousands of shells to scientists all over the world. In the process, he himself became a conchologist of world repute.

In recognition of what one expert describes as "valuable new information in the field of conchology" no fewer than four new species of shellfish discovered in Oman have been named after the Bosch family: *Conus boschi*, *Ancilla boschi*, *Cymatium boschi* and, in honor of Dr. Bosch's wife, Eloise, *Acteon eloiseae*, a very colorful and attractive species characterized by three spiral rows of large rose-colored, crescent-shaped blotches, each bordered by a strong black line. A fifth, newly-discovered shell is to be named *Bursa boschdavidi* after one of Dr. Bosch's sons, David, who works for Aramco in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.

Altogether, Dr. and Mrs. Bosch have identified over 500 different types of shell in Oman - a country particularly rich in shellfish because of the varied habitat around its coasts; in places, mountains plunge steeply into a deep nutritious sea, and in others, white sandy beaches slope gently into warm shallow waters.

These beaches are also a haven for sea turtles. Five species - the loggerhead, green turtle, hawksbill, Olive Ridley turtle and leatherback - are found in Oman, and two of these species commonly breed there.

The green turtle breeds on the mainland beaches of Ra's al-Hadd, Oman's easternmost point, while the loggerheads lay their eggs by the thousands on Masirah Island, just off Oman's central coast. Masirah, in fact, is the world's largest known breeding ground for sea turtles. It is also a sanctuary for some 200 species of birds.

This year, the turtles and birds are sharing their largely barren, mainly rocky, 64-kilometer-long island (40 miles) with U.S. engineers engaged in a nearly \$170 million expansion of Masirah's tiny airfield for the Omanis. What the effect will be on the wildlife is still unknown.

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