

# Climate Crisis – The Decline of Biodiversity and an Over 140-Year-Old Necklace

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*Fig. 1: Collection: Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK), Hamburg (DE); Object number: E 709; Name: Maremare; Place & Community Details: M̄ajel, Marshall Islands; Maker's Name: unknown; Materials: Spondylus, coconut shell, white shells; Collector: Carl Wilhelm Lüders; Date collected: Before 1879, accessioned 1879. © MARKK, photo: P. Schimweg.*



The *maremare*, a necklace from Majel, Marshall Islands, is made of spondylus shells, coconut shells, and white shells, threaded on a cord made from pandanus leaves. The MARKK collections hold several similar spondylus necklaces from the Marshall Islands from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries; this one is registered with the inventory number E 709. The previous owner, who is listed in the inventory book as the donor as well as seller, is Carl Wilhelm Lüders (1823–1896). He appropriated the necklace before 1879. The merchant from Hamburg was head of the former museum (today MARKK) as the director from 1 January 1879 until 1 October 1896, and integrated his private collection into the museum collection.<sup>1</sup> For over a decade, his salary included a payment for his collection. No further details on the acquisitions from Lüders are known to this date.

The shell *Spondylus* is found in warmer seas worldwide. *Spondylus* has played an important cultural and economic role in the Marshall Islands, and necklaces made of spondylus are still of great relevance in the region today. They are a piece of jewellery, an object of value and a status symbol that, when worn today, serves as a proud expression of Marshallese identity. I first came across the necklace during an object viewing at a meeting with members of the international Water Think Tank, who advised the planning process for the exhibition *Wasser Botschaften* (Water Messages) which opened at the Museum am Rothenbaum – Kulturen und Künste der Welt (MARKK) in February 2023. Within the framework of the exhibition, the curatorial team examined how ecological knowledge comes to exist in the collections via the theme of water.

With rising sea levels, dying coral reefs, tsunamis, and water pollution, oceans play a central role in the unpredictability of the climate crisis. Rising sea levels threaten to swallow coastal areas and island nations, while heavy rains flood cities and rivers.<sup>2</sup> Livelihoods, particularly those which are subsistence-based, are at risk, as are water and food security, health, indigenous knowledge, and cultural identity.<sup>3</sup> Rising sea levels are becoming a major problem in the Pacific Island countries – these volcanic islands and atolls are sinking into the ocean. As a result, in 2015, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, committed to achieving CO<sub>2</sub> neutrality by 2050.

On the Marshall Islands, the spondylus shells, fishhooks, and other marine goods were historically exchanged for breadfruit and arrowroot. The value of necklaces made of spondylus highly correlated with the rarity of the shell. The more consistent the colouration of the processed discs, the more the necklace was worth. Its value was deeply connected to the elaborate processing techniques of the material. Tools that came to the islands through trade with people of the Global North, nations with a privileged position due to centuries of exploitation of the Global

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1 Kokott 2018, 181–2.

2 Thomas et al. 2020, 6.

3 Thomas et al. 2020, 10.

South, displaced previous manufacturing techniques and the necklaces ceased to be produced in this way. In the early 2000s, the Marshallese Cultural Center on Kwajalein<sup>4</sup> initiated a revival of original techniques.<sup>5</sup>

Climate activists from the Pacific Islands wear necklaces made of shells which are contemporary interpretations of the historic one that is found in the MARKK's collection. Various Indigenous peoples of the Pacific who are committed to fighting for climate crisis awareness have joined forces under the name Pacific Climate Warriors. The Pacific Climate Warriors use the strategy of wearing the clothing, jewellery, and other material culture of their respective islands in their impactful public campaigns, staging themselves as 'warriors' who stand up to climate change rather than slipping into the role of passive victims.<sup>6</sup> Activists' clothing varies but is visually coherent because it is made from ecological materials. The raw materials used, such as pandanus and coconut fibres, shells (such as the spondylus), feathers, and tapa bark, occur naturally in the Pacific. By dressing with materials sourced from their environment, the Pacific Climate Warriors highlight the very biodiversity that is in jeopardy due to the climate crisis. They advocate a self-determined, carbon-free future that remains closely connected to their ancestors, cultures, and environments.<sup>7</sup>

The people living on the islands recognize a decline in biodiversity from the decreasing numbers of shells, coral, and fish. Increasingly warmer oceans, heavy precipitation, and droughts are affecting the occurrence of spondylus even further.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the inhabitants of the islands and atolls in the Pacific Ocean will have fewer (or different) resources available to them in the future.<sup>9</sup> The necklace, as well as other expressions of material culture from the regions that are preserved in the MARKK's ethnographic collections, are witnesses to a declining biodiversity today. Necklaces, ear and arm jewellery, as well as clothing, mats, weapons, houses, and outrigger canoes were made from the materials that were available in the environment. The Global North is both responsible for colonial displacement and a primary contributor to the climate crisis. The presence of this necklace in the Global North is a reminder of these two facts, especially considering that the necklace is held in an ethnographic collection closely linked to a colonial project. Today, this could serve as a starting point for dialogues. Exchanges about the ecological knowledge contained in this material heritage, and the responsibility of this museum and ethnographic

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4 Established in 1998 on Kwajalein. <[https://www.facebook.com/marshallseculturalcenter/about/?ref=page\\_internal](https://www.facebook.com/marshallseculturalcenter/about/?ref=page_internal)> accessed on 11 Aug 2022. Website (currently not accessible): <<https://www.marshallse-cultural-center.org/>>.

5 Lindborg and Lindborg 2006.

6 Farbotko and Kitara 2021.

7 Steiner 2015, 149.

8 Titifanue et al. 2017, 135.

9 Titifanue et al. 2017, 142.

museums in the Global North in general, can serve to address the current climate crisis. This, combined with the bold campaigns of the Pacific Climate Warriors, could constitute the first steps towards a more self-determined future.

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