

EXPLOITATION OF MOLLUSCS IN NORTHERN MOZAMBIQUE *

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Exploitatie van weekdieren in Noord-Mozambique

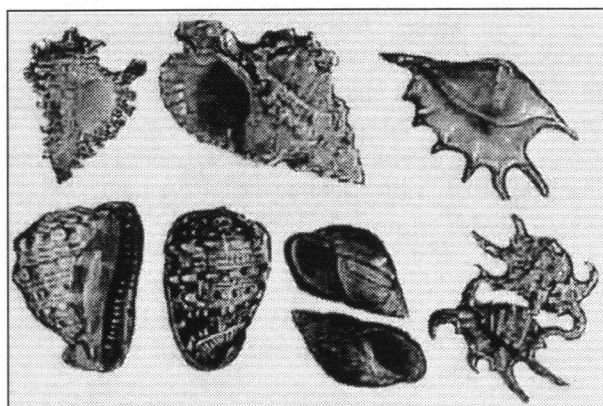
Een enorm transport van 50.000 schelpen, afkomstig uit Mozambique is in juli vorig jaar onderschept in Durban, Zuid-Afrika. De schelpen, afkomstig van levend verzamelde dieren, waren bestemd voor Italië, kennelijk om te worden gebruikt voor cameeën en als ingrediënten voor speciale producten. Aangezien noch het verzamelen in Mozambique, noch het transport van de aangetroffen schelpen verboden is - zij komen niet voor op de lijst van beschermde soorten - waren de autoriteiten verplicht het transport zijn weg te laten vervolgen. Het is niet bekend hoe vaak dergelijks transporten plaats vinden en dus evenmin of en hoelang de natuur een dergelijke aanslag kan verdragen. Het is de vraag uit het rijke deel van de wereld tegenover het aanbod van arme mensen die iets willen verdienen. Misschien dat het bekend worden van dit transport de autoriteiten in Mozambique ertoe brengt wettelijke maatregelen te nemen, terwijl men zich in de consumptiemaatschappij beter zou moeten beraden op de verhouding tussen economie en de exploitatie van natuurlijke bronnen. Dat kan al beginnen bij de opvoeding.

On Tuesday, 15 July 2003, a container of shells en route from northern Mozambique (Nacala) to Italy (Naples) was intercepted by port authorities in Durban. Alarmed at the size of the shipment, the authorities alerted the provincial nature conservation agency, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, who in turn seized the cargo for further investigation under the South African Marine Living Resources Act. The shipment of almost 50,000 shells, weighing approximately 11 tons, comprised the following:

Species	Quantity
Red helmet shell (<i>Cypaecassis rufa</i>)	15,450
Frog shell (<i>Tutufa bubo</i>)	661
Common spider shell (<i>Lambis lambis</i>)	1,500
Spiny murex (<i>Chicoreus ramosus</i>)	17,308
Pink-lipped agate snail (<i>Achatina immaculata</i>)	12,470
Total	48,219

These species, with the exception of the agate snails, are all spectacular tropical marine species and were almost certainly destined for the ornamental shell trade. The red helmet shells would most likely be used to make cameo jewellery, a popular item in Italy, much manufactured in Naples. Indeed the consignee to which the shipment was being sent, identified as "Torre del Greco", is a suburb of Naples known for its cameo industry. The possible use of the agate snails is not clear, but it could be that they would be ground up and used as ingredients of specialised products, for example pottery glazes (natural whiting).

All of the ornamental species were without doubt collected alive - the fresh condition of the shells and the smell of the rotting remains of the animals inside the shells was clear evidence of this. They would have been collected, probably by subsistence gatherers, in the sheltered lagoons and reefs on the northern Mozambique coast.



Some of the nearly 50,000 shells exported from northern Mozambique to Italy; the vast majority harvested alive. Clockwise, from top left, *Chicoreus ramosus*, *Tutufa bubo*, *Lambis lambis*, *Lambis chiragra arthritica* (x2), *Achatina immaculata* (x2), *Cypaecassis rufa* (x2).

Although harvesting of these animals on this scale must be a matter of concern, the fact remained that, unless specifically prohibited by Mozambican law, the South African authorities could not legitimately impound the cargo indefinitely and would have to allow it to continue its journey to Italy. None of the species concerned is listed in the CITES appendices governing the trade in threatened species, and so, if the harvesting in Mozambique was not illegal, then no laws were broken and the trade in the shells was permissible. Subsequent investigation revealed that permits for shipping the cargo were issued, but that these originated from the Mozambican Ministry of Agriculture and concerned matters relating to animal and plant health. The National Directorate of Fisheries Administration in the Ministry of Fisheries was evidently not aware of the shipment. Seemingly, Mozambican law had not been broken, but rather ingeniously circumvented, and thus the South African port authorities were obliged to allow the shipment to continue its journey to Italy.

It is a fact of life today that economics dictates that nature's resources must, wherever possible, be used to human advantage. Underpinning this, however, is the principle of sustainable utilisation. In this case I am sure that there is virtually no information available to indicate whether this level of harvesting of living molluscs is in fact sustainable.

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Similarly, we have no information regarding the frequency with which such shipments occur. Was this a once-off cargo or do these shipments occur regularly and if so, how often? Hopefully, the discovery of this large shipment has now alerted the Mozambican fisheries authorities to the scale of the exploitation and they will investigate further and consider implementing regulations, if these are not already in place.

Although the species involved may be common in pristine tropical habitats, their numbers are not inexhaustible and some are important predators in these ecosystems.

Trade in live-collected ornamental shells occurs simply because there is a demand for the product, largely in western society. Those who buy the shells are the people who perpetuate the exploitation—buy a shell, kill a mollusc, albeit indirectly. It is quite unrealistic to blame the desperately poor people of northern Mozambique for this—they have to feed themselves. Similarly businessmen are businessmen, and they will take any

opportunity to make money. The way to address the problem is through education—environmental education—encouraging people to think about the environmental implications of their actions—teaching people things that will impact upon the day to day decisions that they make for the rest of their lives. At the risk of sounding like a rampant “greeny”, I ask: is it more important that children learn that the gravitational constant is 9.8 ms^{-2} , or that William the Conqueror invaded England in 1066, than that they learn about their own impact on the world in which they live? Surely, in today’s hugely consumptive society, environmental education needs to be given greater priority in the school curriculum.

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