About Our Cover

These colorful creatures are the famous giant clams—the world’s largest living bivalve mollusk (genus *Tridacna*), locally called *pā’ua*, their Maori name), with a wide distribution across the Indo-Pacific region. They are seen here in a tank at a breeding facility on the atoll of Aitutaki, one of the Cook Islands.

According to the Ministry of Marine Resources in the Cook Islands, there are two native species of giant clam in the islands’ waters. A smaller rugose variety (*Tridacna maxima*) is commonly found in lagoons, and a larger fluted clam (*T. squamosa*) is found outside the reef. The largest of the giant clams, *T. gigas*, is not native but was introduced to Aitutaki from Australia in 1990. These clams have all experienced population declines because of overharvesting, but attempts are being made to grow these animals in captivity and release them to the wild. The largest of these creatures found to date had a shell 137 cm long and weighed as much as 250 kg when alive.

The larval clams are planktonic but quickly settle to the ocean floor as they begin to produce a calcium carbonate shell after just two days. These animals are primarily filter feeders, but their mantle supports a remarkable ecosystem of symbiotic algae (zooxanthellae). During the day, the clam extends its mantle tissue so that the algae can photosynthesize and, in the process, provide the clams with a supplemental nutrient source.

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Contents

Featured Articles

Bringing Astrobiology Down to Earth

Astrobiology as an engaging context for the Socratic method

Catherine L. Quinlan


Making Sense of Hardy-Weinberg Equilibrium

Understanding an important ecological principle by reviewing typical textbook problems & applying it to a model problem

Mike U. Smith, John T. Baldwin

ABO Blood Groups

Understanding the molecular basis of ABO blood groups

Susan Offner

Research on Learning

Modeling with Nonliving Objects to Enhance Understanding of Phylogenetic Tree Construction

An alternative approach to teaching students how to draw trees using familiar objects

Evan Lampert, Jennifer Mook

Inquiry & Investigation

Exploring the Methods of Science Using Nightcrawler Decomposition

Learning to use the methods of science in dissection, anatomy & decomposition

Sarah L. Bennett

“Finding Garrett”: An Evolutionary Language Development Game

Developing novel strategies (languages) to solve the common problem of finding a student who mimics an essential resource

Madeline K. Strom, Kathleen A. Carroll, Garrett Davis, William Hultman, Tess Kosycarz, Loren D. Hayes

The Luria-Delbrück Fluctuation Test as a Classroom Investigation in Darwinian Evolution

A simple experiment for beginning students to learn how to apply basic principles of evolutionary biology & scientific reasoning

George P. Smith, Miriam Golomb, Sidney K. Billstein, Stephen Montgomery Smith

Exploring Carbohydrates with Bananas

Going bananas over bananas! Investigating carbohydrates across different scales of organization

Dawn A. Tamarkin

Tips, Tricks & Techniques

Using Mobile Devices to Engage Students in Evolutionary Thinking

Photographing species with your phone to construct a phylogenetic hypothesis for the relationships observed

Steven J. Lyons, Brant G. Miller

Traffic Jam Response: Hands-on Activities for Exploring Artery Roadblocks

Finding the roadblock and seeing what happens to the cardiac muscle cells stuck in traffic

Robert M. Kao

Departments

Guest Editorial • Biology Education in an Era of Acronyms • Robert E. Yager

Book Reviews • Elizabeth Cowles, Department Editor