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# The Role of the Beachcombers in the Caroline Islands

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Beachcombers are a much reviled class of men. Contemptuously dismissed as 'reprobates' or 'abandoned and degenerate characters', they have time and again been charged with infecting the islanders with whom they lived with a moral pestilence ultimately more destructive than the epidemics of smallpox and influenza that ravaged these populations. Yet as H. E. Maude has pointed out in his masterful survey of beachcombers,<sup>(1)</sup> that motley array of deserters, escaped convicts, castaways and wanderers that gathered on many a Pacific island must be credited with more positive contributions as well—not the least of which was their interpretation of Western culture to the native populations that served to prepare them for changes still to come. Aside from such important general roles as cultural mediator, beachcombers have served more specific functions that have varied with time and place, as Professor Maude clearly shows. In this essay, I propose to explore the uses to which beachcombers were put on those few islands of the Caroline group where they were found in any numbers during the nineteenth century: Palau, Kusaie and Ponape. The prominence of beachcombers and the roles they assumed differed considerably even among these three islands, as will be seen.

The classical era of beachcombing in the Carolines began in 1783 with the wreck of the East India packet *Antelope* at Palau and the involuntary three-month residence of its crew. Not that this was the first time whites had ever lived ashore in the Caroline Islands; there is an account of seven white men landing on Ulithi in 1684, most likely the survivors of a shipwreck,<sup>(2)</sup> and there were presumably others of whom no historical record remains. But these were isolated instances of a few whites living ashore over the span of more than three centuries. The founding of beach communities~ awaited the opening of regular ship routes through Micronesian waters, and that occurred only in the late eighteenth century.

The castaways from the *Antelope* received generous treatment at the hands of the friendly Palauans, we are told. But even after a romanticized account of their stay appeared in the form of a book, George Keate's *An Account of the Pelew Islands*, Palau never attracted a great number of whites.<sup>(3)</sup> The majority of foreigners who took up residence there for a time were, with a few notable exceptions, the victims of shipwrecks: the *Antelope* in 1783, the *Mentor* in 1832,<sup>(4)</sup> the *Dash* in 1834,<sup>(5)</sup> and the *Renown* in 1870;<sup>(6)</sup> and most of these remained for only a few months. The castaways were invariably well treated by the Palauans, it would appear. Even the survivors of the *Mentor*, whose tribulations were publicized in Horace Holden's *Narrative of a Shipwreck*, received considerate treatment and help in building the makeshift boat with which they intended to sail to the Indies; their misfortune, according to Holden, was to fall into the hands of the inhabitants of Tobi, an island some two hundred miles to the south-west of Palau. Despite the friendliness of their hosts to the castaways on Palau, only two of them elected to remain permanently on the island. They, together with a handful of other foreigners who were left by visiting ships, made up the small contingent of beachcombers who lived on Palau for any length of time before the 1870s. Evidently something more than assurance of adequate food resources and good treatment by the islanders was necessary to turn an island into a haven for discontented whites.

But if Palau could claim few white residents throughout most of the nineteenth century, the other islands in the western Carolines had virtually none. The three seamen from the *Duff* who were put ashore at their own request on Satawal and Lamotrek in 1797 are about the only whites hardy enough to have made their home on any of the tiny, poorly endowed coral atolls in the region, and they were not heard of again.<sup>(7)</sup> The high island of Yap proved just as inhospitable to potential beachcombers, if for all together different reasons. Yapese, a strong tradition asserts, discouraged early visitors even to the point of massacring ships' crews whenever possible. The itinerant trading captains Andrew Chevne and Alfred Tetens, the first foreigners known to have visited that island regularly