

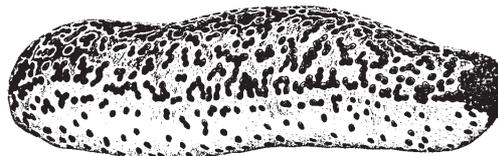
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THE HARVESTING OF RORI (sea cucumbers) IN RAROTONGA, COOK ISLANDS

by Anna Tiraa-Passfield¹

In this article I look at the harvesting of *rori* (sea cucumbers) in the lagoon and reef flats of the island of Rarotonga, Cook Islands. Collection of *rori* is done mainly by women at low tide. *Rori* are a traditional food. Several species are harvested, either for their mature gonads, locally called *matu rori* or their body wall (Table 1). Other uses include traditional medicine and in fishing.

For fishing, *rori toto* is sometimes used to draw an octopus from its hole in the reef flat. This is done by rubbing the body of the *rori* on a stick, which is then placed inside the cavity of the reef flat. The bitterness of the *rori* draws the octopus out of its hole (pers. comm. Teina Rongo). Similarly, rubbing the skin of *rori toto*



in a rock pool is reported to have been used in the past to stun fish trapped by receding tides.

Beche de mer is sometimes used in traditional medicine. However, for several reasons, the practice of traditional medicine in the Cooks Islands is a closely guarded secret among practitioners.

Some fear that outsiders may abuse the knowledge of traditional medicine for their own purposes. It is also thought that the *mana* (strength) associated with this practice might be lost were the knowledge to be revealed. Therefore my informant, a traditional practitioner, understandably would not reveal which species are used for what illness.

¹ Takitumu Conservation Area, P.O. Box 817, Rarotonga, Cook Islands. Tel 682-22839 email: passfiel@gatepoly.co.ck

In a 1989 population study, it was found that *rori toto* and *rori tapou* were the commonest species in the lagoon. *Rori puakatoro* are also reasonably abundant on the reef-flat surf zone.

The species most commonly harvested is the *rori tapou*, sought for its mature gonads (*matu rori*), which appear as a mass of white strands. The *matu rori* season is October to January. To remove the *matu*, the pointed tip of a knife or nail is inserted near the head of the animal. This is to avoid the white sticky substance (cuvorian tubules) ejected from the anus. The *matu* is then removed from the incision. The *rori* is then tossed back into the sea, since it is believed that after about 2 weeks, its gonads will have regenerated and so it can be harvested again (More Rua, pers. comm.). Immature gonads are red, and are not normally eaten. *Matu rori* can be eaten either raw or fried in butter.

One lady told me that when the *tiare taina* (*Gardenia augusta*) flowers it indicates that the *matu rori* is ready to harvest. Normally, *matu rori* is harvested from one area of Rarotonga first, followed by other areas as the *matu rori* becomes ripe elsewhere.

The *matu* is also removed from *rori pua* during the same season as *rori tapou*, and from *rori kanaena* all year round (pers. comm. Linda Taramai).

The body wall of several *rori* species is also used to prepare a local delicacy, called *mitiore*. The basic dish is prepared by marinating the finely chopped body wall with crushed *koiti* (*Ocyboda lativs*), a crab found on the beach, and finely scraped coconut. The best time to collect *koiti* is at night during new moon. However, they can be collected during the day, but this involves digging them from the sand. This mixture is

then left to ferment. Other ingredients can be added to this basic recipe to provide variety. *Mitiore* is usually served as a side dish to accompany a main meal.

Glossary

Rori - Sea cucumber.

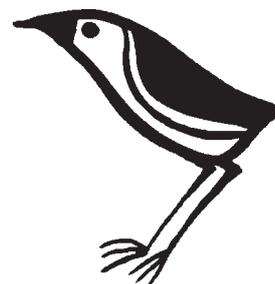
Mitiore - A local delicacy. In the case of the *rori*, it is prepared by removing the bitter outer layer of the body wall by scrapping with a knife or by rubbing the animal in sand. The body wall is cut finely and mixed with lightly scraped coconut and crushed crabs called *Koiti* (*Ocyboda lativs*). Other marine invertebrates can be used instead of *rori*, such as trochus meat, or turban snails.

Matu rori - Mature gonads of the *rori*.

Acknowledgements

Most of the information reported here is from my aunties, Linda and Tai Taramai, uncle Tira Albert, Teina Rongo, More Rua. A small amount of my own knowledge of the *rori* is also included. Thanks to Ian Karika Wilmott for checking the Maori names and the contents of this article.

Meitaki maata



Rarotongan Name	Scientific name	Uses and comments
<i>Rori toto</i>	<i>Holothuria atra</i>	Food (<i>Mitiore</i> , see glossary); fishing.
<i>Rori tapou</i>	<i>H. leucospilota</i>	Mature gonads (<i>Matu rori</i>) eaten raw or cooked.
<i>Rori pua</i>	<i>H. cinerascens</i>	<i>Mitiore</i> , <i>Matu rori</i>
<i>Rori puakatoro</i>	<i>Actinopyga mauritiana</i>	Prepared in <i>rukau</i> (taro leaves) with coconut cream in the traditional earth oven. Tastes like pork.
<i>Rori kanaena</i>	<i>H. hilla</i>	<i>Matu rori</i> . Animal emerges at night from under coral rocks. Collection in daytime involves turning rocks over.
<i>Rori ngata</i>	<i>Stichopus horrens?</i>	(not established)
<i>Rori urari</i>	(not established)	<i>Mitiore</i>

Table 1. Names of *Rori* harvested and their uses