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What do shipworms reveal about shifting environmental, economic and cultural relationships to the ocean in the colonial and postcolonial Pacific?

The problem

Shipworms were historically the enemies of ship captains and maritime engineers, yet we understand little of their place in the world's largest ocean. Shipworms' impacts on shipping and coastal infrastructure were obscured as metal and concrete replaced timber, chemicals protected wood, and harbour pollution reduced biodiversity. Examining colonial and capitalist narratives alongside indigenous knowledges that challenge their accounts of shipworms as pests, this project questions how shipworms' many stories might transform histories of oceanic globalisation.

Core interest

I am interested in the interplay of human and more-than-human engineers in the making and unmaking of coastlines and sea. Shipworms, with other molluscs and marine species, provide a window into the wider multispecies nature of oceanic history, revealing the interconnections with land, plants and soils as well as saltwater, waves and wind. These seemingly small species and small stories enable a deep exploration of the complex and often contradictory environmental relationships that have shaped the contemporary Pacific.

global dis:connect

My project explores the concept of 'shipworm modernity' to encapsulate material and metaphorical understandings of shipworms as an embodiment of the interplay between connection and dis:connection in globalising oceanic networks. In an era of increasing colonial development in the Pacific, these bivalves both flowed between and disrupted the connections between coastlines, infrastructure, ecosystems and economies. There are scholarly disconnections too: recent interest in shipworms as a sustainable food source is an underacknowledged return to some indigenous engagement with these molluscs.

Preliminary results

My work to date has focused on chewpoints, where shipworms destroyed wharf piles in Pacific ports. In the late 19th and early 20th century, colonial scientists struggled to find effective global solutions to the destructive power of the worm. Building on this archival research, I am analysing and connecting these stories with deeper indigenous histories and contemporary scientific discussions to consider how shipworms are emblematic of the ocean in the Anthropocene.

