

PROFILE

José Leal

Museum director, scientist, and committed beach bum



José Leal (left) was part of a scientific team along with Robert Costello, a computer specialist with the Smithsonian Institution, on a shell museum-backed expedition to collect deep-water shells in the Bahamas.

Storms in the Gulf of Mexico bring hordes of shell-seekers to Sanibel's shores. They also draw José Leal, director of The Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum on Sanibel and president-elect of the American Malacological Society—but he doesn't come for the shells. He's more likely to be in a different group of diehards—those bobbing on surfboards, riding the same swells that carry the shells.

By Jill Tyrer

After a twenty-year hiatus, José (pronounced with a hard J, as in “Joe”) took up the hobby again in 2000. “What the heck,” he says. “Life is too short.” Now he goes when he gets a chance, sometimes with the younger of his two daughters.

As much as shells are a part of his life, you won't often find him joining the collectors on the beach. He gave up his collection years ago—a professional decision when he went to graduate school.

On the other hand, his workplace is in



For Leal, diving to collect shells isn't just fun, it's professional.

the midst of a world-class shell collection.

Most people see only the galleries on the museum's main floor, where they learn about the science of mollusks, their places in natural systems, their historical roles, and the artworks they inspire.

Upstairs in Dr. Leal's office, hardly a shell is in sight, except for a couple of rough-looking cockscomb oysters he's fond of. But the walls of the octagon-shaped second floor are lined with rows of lockers filled with shells. They come from all over the globe, from present day to prehistory, and they draw scientists nationally and internationally.

The shell museum is much more than a gallery of pretty sea life. It's a natural history museum whose collections hold the answers to countless questions about the planet and its inhabitants.

Leal compares the museum's collection to a library. “The information is here. It just needs to be interpreted,” he says, and not just for scientists. “We use the mollusks as a hook to inform people about natural his-

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PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

Much of Leal's work with the shell museum is administrative, but he continues his research.

tory. They're living organisms and they're a part of the larger ecosystems. The underlying, major take-home lesson is one of not only mollusks, but the whole biology experience."

Beach Bum

Leal started taking home those lessons as a child growing up in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. "I was lucky enough to be born pretty close to the beach and spend my whole early years—up to the time I went to college, when things became a little more serious—as a beach person."

Since then, Leal has built a daunting curriculum vitae and an impressive professional reputation as a malacologist. Armed with bachelor and master's degrees from the Federal University of Rio de Janeiro, he earned his doctorate in marine biology and fisheries at the University of Miami. He served as a visiting professor at France's national museum of natural history in Paris and did postdoctoral work at Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History. He is known for his contributions dealing with biogeography and analyzing Brazilian and island fauna, and he has published a definitive book on the subject. He also contributed to a book on edible shellfish—there are a lot more than United States consumers know about, he points out—which the United Nations uses to help feed developing nations. He's also the father of fifteen-year-old Cecilia and nine-year-old Julia.

But at his very core, he says, "I still consider myself a beach bum."

It's an identity that goes way beyond the

surfing. Beach people can be found in pockets throughout the world where temperate climates and shorelines meet, he explains. They're at home on the beach and in the water, and couldn't care less if they get sand in their best shoes. It's a lifestyle and a community. In Rio, old folks gather on the boardwalk daily to harp about the government and "solve the world's problems," he says, and the same group of volleyball players can be seen every weekend. "It's like *Cheers*. You go there and always see someone."

Growing up near the beach, he had some of his first encounters with sea life with hole-dwelling crabs along the rocky coastline in Rio, where the water is relatively cold. He recalls scrambling across the rocks at low tide to search the holes and tidal pools, "picking up the crabs and the sensation of doing something potentially dangerous, trying not to get caught by the claws and in the process finding all kinds of stuff," he says. "It was when I was growing up in the late '50s, early '60s when I really became aware of that kind of stuff. It was never like Sanibel, but there were shells on the beach you could find." There were even more in the water, as he discovered when he

Museum Director

Leal was chosen as director of The Bailey-Matthews Shell Museum in 1996 partly due to Jerry Harasewych, curator of mollusks at the Smithsonian, who was on the search committee and had known Leal for years. "We wanted basically a good scientist, good biologist, who was also familiar with the types of shells that collectors and the public are more likely to encounter rather than some obscure land snail that's only found in the Himalayas," says Harasewych. Leal's credentials, combined with his soft-spoken, unassuming personality—as Harasewych says, "He doesn't suck all the air out of a room when he enters"—made him a good choice for the administrative position.

It was also Harasewych who named Leal his successor as editor of *The Nautilus*, the second-oldest malacological journal in the world.

Unlike many scientists who land in administrative positions, Leal has not given up research. In 1999, he was on a shell museum expedition to collect deep-water shells in the Bahamas, joining a team of scientists on a series of deep-

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started snorkeling at a young age.

José was the kind of ten-year-old boy who took his finds home and looked them up. "My home was always a learning place. Dad has wall-to-wall books."

Not all lessons came from the books, though. "Sea stars are the ones that told me very early on that they wouldn't die and stay all neat and clean," he explains. It's a lesson he tries to share with Sanibel visitors.

It was always for fun, even into his 20s in the early 1970s, when he was attending college at the Federal University. Every weekend, he would join a group of friends and go to a little town on the coast to dive and snorkel. Those people, like him, are now museum professionals and university professors.

"The ones who make a career out of it started like that," he says, no matter where they grew up. Another of his goals with the museum is to encourage that interest. "If you have people at a very young age with that spark, we want to foster it."

water dives aboard a submersible.

In addition to continuing research, he has helped build the museum into a reputable institution. Scientists visit from around the world, but just as welcome are children, sandy from the beach, who walk in to ask about a dripping shell they're holding.

Among his recent projects: a new Calusa exhibit at the museum to complement a similar exhibit at Florida's Museum of Natural History, pursuing accreditation by the American Association of Museums, writing a book on the shells of Southwest Florida, completing a laminated guide for beachcombers, and building a guide to local shells on the museum's Web site.

"The most rewarding thing is being able to witness the march of the museum," he says. "The idea is to keep adding and making it better." 🐚

Jill Tyrer is editor of Times of the Islands.