

urban antics

by John Hunter

A few dollars a day

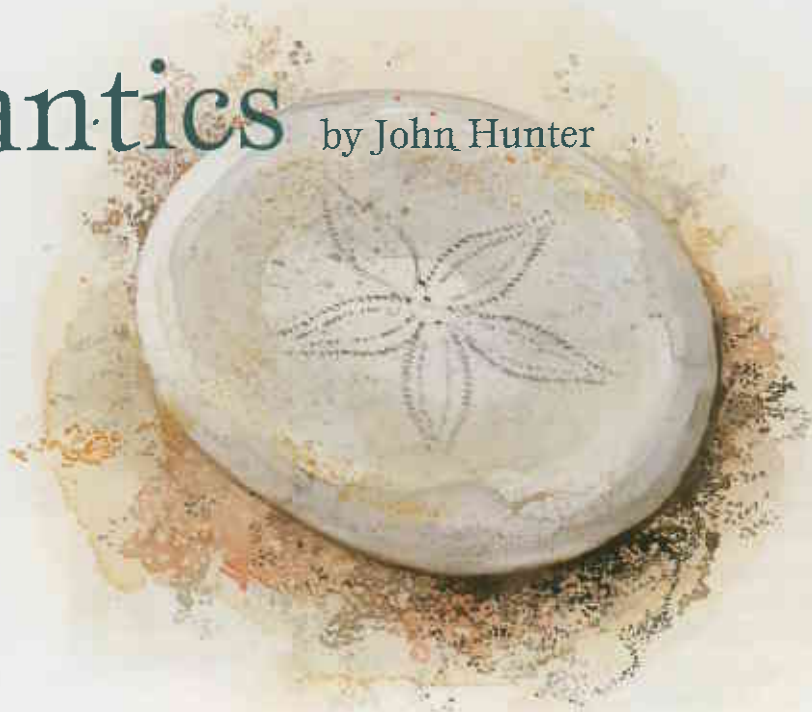
In the summers of the early 'fifties' we used to camp among the Rottnest cypress (*Callitris preissii*) at Coogee Beach. It was heaven. In the distance, a fun fair merry-go-round continuously pumped out hit songs like 'I want a hippopotamus for Christmas' as the afternoon sea breeze raged melodic through guy ropes, pine, sheoak and saltbush. Mornings always seemed the reverse, however. The still, quiet, protected waters of Owen Anchorage were glass-like, as an easterly wind wafted wearily toward Carnac and Garden islands.

Morning swims in the clear stillness of the lagoon-like ocean between Woodman Point and Coogee were soooo... good. Here, young children on car tyre tubes would bob around staring wide-eyed through facemasks at an underwater world of amazing and diverse marine life at arm's reach.

Snorkelling at Perth's beaches is a great recreation. Today, it is likely that those now 'big kids' are still hooked on observing a myriad of strange and fascinating sea creatures.

One such group of marine animals that provided hours of fun was made up of the sea stars (starfish) and sea urchins. It was one thing to see them alive if you ventured out to the seagrass beds or snorkelled along the Woodman Point groyne. But many a good time was had searching the sandy shallows, or combing the beach, to collect the hard test, or skeleton, of an urchin called the sand dollar.

The stars and urchins are part of the phylum of animals referred to as echinoderms. These are made up of thousands of species, including brittle stars, sea cucumbers and sea lilies.



Although some echinoderms resemble tiny hedgehogs with large spines and pencils, others, like the sea stars and sand dollars, appear smooth or, at most, rough-skinned. If viewed with a magnifying glass, however, it is easy to see the tiny but similar tube feet and stalked, chalky, pincer-like structures (pedicellariae).

Live sand dollars burrow in the sea floor, where, as scavengers, they consume sand and silt, to extract plant and animal material. If you look hard, sometimes you can see the disc outline of the animals as they lie just under the sand surface of the sea floor. A gentle wafting of water over the outline usually uncovers the attractive five-pointed star-shaped petals on the spiny, orange or pink skin of the animal.

In those early days of simple entertainment—and I'm sure it is still the same for some today—the collection of the flat tests of dead sand dollars added fun to summer holidays. While the size of the dead shells varied, the popular size sought were those slightly bigger than the then current two-shilling piece. One can only surmise that the attractive petal-like design and the smooth coin-sized shell resembled a foreign dollar piece, or perhaps a brooch to be painted for mum. Or were they simply a perfect object to see who could skim them out the furthest into the bay? I forget.

Whatever it was, it was fun and freedom, a time of childhood discovery at a somewhat remote place, and all for a few dollars a day.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Locally found tests of Lesueur's sand dollar (*Peronella lesueurii*) may reach 12 centimetres across while the shells of Peron's sand dollar (*Peronella peroni*), found on the south coast, reach about five centimetres.
- The vital organs are enclosed inside each test. From the mouth on the underside of the animal five white teeth protrude, a part of the elaborate chewing mechanism called Aristotle's lantern because of its oil lantern-like shape.

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