



## Palau and the Coconut Beetle

**W**ORD OF a wasp that kills the coconut beetle in the Caroline Islands may be reassuring to stricken areas of the Philippines.

Palau, where U.S. Marines saw some of the fiercest slaughter of World War II on Bloody Nose Ridge, is part of the trust territories of the United States in the Pacific Islands. It barely survived Japanese occupation, and now has a new problem.

For several years they "lived on copra, the dried meat of the coconut that is used for soap and vegetable oils. The Japanese cut down a lot of the trees

to make room for an airfield on Peleliu, the American attack destroyed more and the rhinoceros beetle did the rest."

Today the 700 inhabitants of Peleliu, no longer a U.S. Navy base, have just enough coconuts for eating, and none to sell. They export fish to Koror, where nearly half the 8,000 Palauans live, and gather a few *Trochus* shells to sell to Japan for buttons. Life has been nearly impossible—until the arrival of a man from Seattle, now the trust territory entomologist.

Mr. Robert Owen's principal duty is the cultivation of a scurrious African wasp that preys on the rhinoceros beetle in a cruel, but effective way. The rhinoceros beetle is named for

the wicked horn on its proboscis. The creature is black and more than half the size of a man's thumb. It came from Asia in Japanese ships in 1942; in three years it killed half the coconut trees in the Palau Islands.

**T**HE BEETLE breeds in rotten logs. At the flying stage, it bores into coconut fronds until it reaches the growing point of the tree, from which delicious heart-of-palm salads are made. The tree is destroyed.

Luckily, the *Scalia* wasps of Zanzibar and other parts of East Africa thrive on rhinoceros beetle larvae. Mr. Owen raises thousands of these wasps in piles of sawdust in his laboratory, a bombed-out Japanese building. When the wasp finds the larvae, it paralyzes them with a sting. Then it lays its

own eggs nearby, to feed on the larvae as they develop. Through such devices, Palau's copra production has increased 25 percent again.

Mr. Owen also raises Florida cannibal snails which prefers to eat the giant African snail which destroys food-producing gardens in South Sea islands. Theoretically, when the cannibal snails have destroyed all giant African snails, they will begin to eat one another.

In addition to these very practical creatures, Mr. Owen also maintains a small zoo for the inhabitants who otherwise can be amused only by sports and ancient movies. This private zoo includes a Japanese-speaking sulphur-crested cockatoo, plus specimens of sea-going crocodiles, some of which reach a length of 30 feet.

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### Welcome Lightning

*Lightning is essential to fertilizing plants. For few plants can take nitrogen out of the air. Most of them take it, combined with oxygen, from the soils, and lightning puts it there. For lightning causes nitrogen and oxygen to combine; and then rain carries millions of tons of this valuable fixed nitrogen down to the earth yearly to sustain vegetation.*

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