

Coral-reefs are sometimes viewed as only traps to surprise and wreck the unwary mariner; but whoever has visited the dreary prison-house, St. Helena, will have some appreciation of the benefits derived from the growing zoophytes.

But in addition to these general benefits, there are also contributions from the larger reef regions to the commerce of the world. Besides pearls, there is the *biche de mer* (called also *bêche de mer*, *sea-ginseng*, and in China, *tripang*), thousands of hundredweight of which annually enter the Chinese market from the reef-regions of the East Indies, Australia, and the seas to the north, including the Feejee Archipelago. This favourite material for Chinese dishes, either stews or soups, &c., is *dried holothuria*—large slug-like animals, called often *sea slugs*, and also *sea cucumbers*, from their form in the contracted state. They are not slugs, but are most nearly related to the echinus, though having a thick flexible skin, while the echinus has for its exterior a firm shell, armed about with spines. The largest are only nine or ten inches long when contracted; but they lengthen out sometimes to two feet or more. They live just under the sand in the shallow waters, with the head projecting and bearing a beautiful feathery rosette or flower which is branchial in nature. To fit them for exportation, the holothuria, of which half a dozen different kinds are taken, are slit open, boiled, and then dried, in which last state they look like “smoked sausages.” Dr. S. Wells Williams says, in his “Middle Kingdom,” that “when soaked in water, the material resembles pork rind, and is like that in taste when stewed.” They are brought to China by the Malays from Macassar and elsewhere. There are also large drying-houses at the Feejees, and ships from America make their occasional visits to collect them, with the aid of the Feejees, and to dry and load up for China. The term *biche de mer*, and also the French form of it, *bêche de mer*, are corruptions of the Portuguese *bicho do mar*; which means *sea-worm*, or *sea-slug*.