

## KAVEU, THE COCONUT CRAB

The coconut crab (*Birgus latro*) or *kaveu* in the pa'umotu language or even *'aveu* in Tahitian, from the family of hermit crabs, is known for its ability to open coconuts by crushing them, with its strong claws, in order to eat the coconut flesh. In French Polynesia, it is confined to the atolls and unfortunately much reduced in numbers as it is now found only on the least inhabited or uninhabited atolls such as Makatea, Taiaro or Tikei in the Tuamotus.

The one which is nicknamed the "robber crab" is an extraordinary creature, with red eyes, and able to change its body colour from violet blue to an orangey red according to its habitat. Weighing up to 4 kg and 40 cm in length, with a leg span of up to one metre, this is the biggest land crab in the world!

Its abdomen is equipped with ten legs. The front pair has very large claws which it uses to break coconuts. The next two pairs are used for moving. The extremities of the third pair are divided into two: thanks to this anatomical peculiarity it is able to climb trees to eat their fruit. The rear legs, which are tiny, are usually kept under the shell.

Like all hermit crabs, the *kaveu* sheds its outer skin as it grows, and it may also use pieces of coconut to protect its body while it is soft. At this stage, it is an ocean crab.

But after the age of three years, it leaves the ocean. Its shell hardens and it loses its ability to breathe in the water. The *kaveu* is then no longer suited to swimming and would drown despite its rudimentary system of gills, probably a vestige of its evolution. It uses a specific organ for breathing, which is halfway between gills and a lung, adapted to take oxygen from the air rather than from water.

Another unusual thing about the coconut crab is its powerful sense of smell. The *kaveu* has antennae which resemble the organs of smell which insects have. The crab moves them by twitching to improve its perception of smell. It can therefore make out interesting smells over great distances, especially those emanating from sources of food: banana, coconut, pandanus fruit...or decomposing meat.

The coconut crab normally lives in a den or a rock crevice, or digs a burrow in the sand or in loose soil. It generally lives in forested and sandy areas where there are coconut trees.

Being quite timid, it moves around quietly making clicking noises, but can become very lively when it is on the alert. The *kaveu*, with its poor eyesight, is relatively easy prey for man, who is its main, if not its only, predator.

The coconut crab can be cooked like a lobster, boiled in water or steamed. Depending on the island, there is a wide range of recipes such as coconut crab cooked in coconut milk.

The flesh of the coconut crab is not found on market stalls, even though it is considered by some to be an aphrodisiac! And although it may occasionally be seen in the market in Papeetē, still alive, with its powerful claws skilfully tied up, the *kaveu* remains a dish which is normally shared only with one's family or friends.

The *kaveu* is very popular with Polynesians. Hunting it is a favourite pastime which is pursued on the island of Makatea, among other places. The smell of the coconut attracts the crabs, making it easy to catch them. The bait, a coconut split in two, is fixed onto a pole 50 cm high, near the burrows.

Tracking coconut crabs can be an original way for visitors to meet the *pa'umotu* population. But following experienced hunters, watching them as they make their approach right up close on the terrain - is a really unique environmental and cultural experience!