



Seashells



Life stages of the lightning whelk. NPS photo.

Where do shells come from?

Seashells are the protective outer covering for animals that live on the ocean floor. At one time, they were actually part of the bodies of sea snails, clams, scallops, and other types of shelled invertebrates, known as mollusks. As these animals grow, so do their shells. When a mollusk dies, its shell stops growing. After the animal decomposes, a beautiful shell is left behind. Other animals, such as barnacles or hermit crabs, may turn the empty shell into their new home. Sometimes, ocean currents pick up empty shells and carry them to shores around the world, which is why Padre Island is known for its shelling opportunities.

Shell Uses

Throughout human history, shells have had a wide variety of uses. Shells have been used as tools, decoration, artwork, and currency. Numerous indigenous groups used shells from the quahog, a hard-shelled clam, and different whelk species. These shells were called *wampum*, and were not only used for currency, but also

as methods of marking events on calendars and for relaying messages to other people. Along the Texas Coast, the abundance of oyster shell middens, or shell mounds, illustrates the importance of oysters and other mollusks in the diet of the Karankawa who lived in the area. How will you use the shells you find on the beach?

Where have all the shells gone?

Many people who have visited the National Seashore for years often ask, "Where have all the shells gone?" Unfortunately, a variety of human impacts have caused a decline in mollusk populations, including commercial ocean trawling, excess nutrients that create oxygen-depleted dead zones, and over-harvesting for consumption. With the growing threats against these creatures, it is critical that each person makes an individual effort to protect these animals. Even though people can collect seashells at the park, it is both unethical and illegal to kill

live sea creatures for their shells, and violators can be fined. The picture below shows the difference between living (brown) and dead (white) sand dollars. Please make the right choice.



Living sand dollar

Dead sand dollar

NPS photo.

Successful Shelling

The best places at the National Seashore for shelling are down island because of the strong convergence of currents at the beach. In order to access this area, you will need a four-wheel drive vehicle. Be sure to scan the base of the dunes or the Sargassum seaweed for shells that may have washed in, especially after a major storm or cold front or during low tide.

See other side.



A. Southern quahog **B.** Atlantic bay scallop **C.** Calico scallop **D.** Giant Atlantic cockle **E.** Saw-toothed pen shell
F. Florida sand dollar **G.** Scotch bonnet **H.** Disc dosinia **I.** Angel wing **J.** Turkey wing **K.** Florida spiny jewel box
L. Shark eye moon snail **M.** Giant eastern murex **N.** Banded tulip **O.** Incongruous ark **P.** Common American sundial
Q. Common Atlantic baby's ear **R.** Lettered olive **S.** Florida fighting conch **T.** Lightning whelk

NPS photo.