

Regarding: Great Barrier Reef, Australia

STONEFISH'S ARSENAL OF TERROR: LOATHSOME FACE AND LETHAL STING!

Amid the delicate loveliness of the reef lurk several of the world's most fearsome hazards. As venomous as a cobra is the stonefish.

Rarely does the visitor see a stonefish, for it lies motionless in the sand, a perfect counterpart of a piece of weathered coral. If prodded, it moves sluggishly. But should an unwary wader step on the fish, thirteen needle-sharp spines bristle erect to inject virulent poison. The victim suffers immediate and unspeakable agony; he may become demented from pain. Death can easily follow.

The author saw two stonefish during five months on the reef; other scientists on longer stays have never spotted one.

The stonefish, a member of the scorpion fish family, is one of the ugliest monstrosities on earth. Gnarled, wrinkled, and warted so as to resemble a piece of dead coral or a disintegrating stone, the creature lies motionless in reef sand or alongside fragments of coral. If a foot approaches, thirteen deadly, needle-sharp spines bristle vertically from the fish's back. Each spine has a pair of poison sacs near its middle and two grooves through which toxic fluid passes upward when pressure is applied. A bare or lightly clad foot, pierced from its own weight by these hypodermics, forces the poison to be injected.

Cone shells belong to the mollusk suborder *Toxoglossa* (poison-tongue). Many of these species are found throughout tropical waters, and their spectacularly patterned shells are prized by collectors. The animal within, however, is extremely poisonous in some species. In 1935 a tourist looking for coral on the Great Barrier Reef picked up a cone shell to examine it. The animal's venom-depositing stiletto pierced the palm, and within hours the man was dead. No experienced collector picks up a living cone shell without leather gloves or a pair of forceps.

Sea wasps, appearing seasonally, are jelly-fish. They can be extremely dangerous. In 1938, off Darwin, Australia, a boy was stung by a sea wasp and died a few minutes later.

Hazards of this sort are ever-present on coral reefs throughout the South Pacific. But a little knowledge and some common sense protect most people who venture onto a reef, just as they safeguard those who cross a busy city street.