Welcome to HMSC Connects! where we go behind the scenes of Harvard museums to explore the connections between us, our big, beautiful world, and even what lies beyond. My name is Jennifer Berglund, part of the exhibits team here at the Harvard museums of science and culture. And I'll be your host. This July, we're focusing on oceans. And to kick off that effort today, I'm speaking with Ingrid Ahlgren, the curator of oceanic collections here at the Peabody Museum at Harvard. The collections she curates mostly originated in the various coral atolls sprinkled around remote regions of the Pacific Ocean. I wanted to ask her about her experience living and working in the Marshall Islands, and the role the ocean plays in both island culture and her own life. Here she is.

Ingrid Ahlgren, welcome to the show. Thanks for having me, Jennie.

You were basically born to love this job and to love Oceania. Can you explain why that is?

I think I have what some people would consider a unique link to the region, although it's not really that uncommon, actually. But my father worked his entire career as something of a rocket scientist, I suppose you'd call him. As part of his job he was a government contractor. Him and my mother raised the family for more than a decade out in the Marshall Islands. There's a US military base there that gets leased out called Kwajalein, and so myself and one of my brothers was born there. And we kind of split my childhood back and forth between Massachusetts were part of his job was based and then the Marshall Islands where I eventually left when I was 13 years old. So, I think I've always felt some kind of deep connection and draw to the place and to the region.

What was it like growing up there?

Ingrid Ahlgren

What was it like growing up there?
I don't think I fully processed where I was or what this place was like. It's like this idyllic place to be a child and to grow up, right? It's a veritable tropical paradise. There's very few people, there's no cars, there's no crime to speak of, the coconut trees have been manicured so that they look nice and so the coconuts don't fall on you as you're walking by. And the ocean was my playground every day as well as all these scattered World War II wrecks and buildings and things. So, it was a really fascinating and an amazing place, but I don't think I fully understood its history. And so, as I grew older, I started to reexamine what it was like to be there and what I thought was my typical childhood. So you've got this idyllic sort of setting on the one hand, but then the other, I started to think about and kind of reckon with, I suppose, the cost that this kind of seemingly perfect setting had. You've got this military base, it's plunked down in the middle of this sovereign, independent nation. They're not a territory of the US. The Republic of the Marshall Islands is an independent nation, it's got this unique language, cultural history, 60,000 indigenous Marshalese people living there, but for me, my own contact with that culture was limited, and it was restricted, and it was kind of buffered or muted by this perfectly manicured American military installation, and so it was weird looking back, you know, to be living in this sovereign nation of basically a majority of Marshalese people with this long history and this ancestral connection to the place, but to have them visibly be the minority at Kwajalein, and this was a place I called home, and so, you know, you walk around, you bicycle around primarily, and it looks like suburban America, but with tropical twist. So there's like a golf course, there's tennis courts, there's an outdoor movie theater, there's two swimming pools, which feels completely unnecessary when you have like a calm lagoon, and, like, white sand beaches around. So you've got that, and then just a few miles away is another island called Ebeye, or Ebeje, where a lot of Marshalese Live, it's like really densely populated. A lot of them moved there because they're drawn to the work opportunities on the military base. So I'd go and visit and it was really fun. You take the ferry over, and I wasn't limited. I was a child, so as long as I had a parent with me and permission to go, it was fine. So we'd go over. They had these great celebrations and parades sometimes. They had this like epic candy selection of Japanese confections that we did not have on the military base. I could go out there and kind of experience and dabble into this culture, but in reverse, the Marshalese people that were living there and working on the base, that was limited and monitored, you know, the people that would come on to the islands would work their jobs, and then they had to go back. As a child, I don't think I necessarily questioned what was going on there, but as an adult, you have a more informed kind of lens to look back through. So I think it really brought me to this place where I was like questioning what I was doing there. You know, what I was doing there, what America was doing there and tracing those histories. That experience in that place never really left me, and it sounds kind of silly and existential. But you know, at the time in my 20s, all I wanted to do was go back and be there. I went back to school to get my Master's degree in anthropology, and that provided the opportunity to go back to the islands to do my research. And, yes, it was an intellectual, academic pursuit, but I also think, in part, it was just me trying to find an excuse
to get back there. I went back and did a research project on Kwajalein and Ebeye kind of looking at the historic cholera outbreak that happened, and looking at some of the social inequalities that led to it. But in that process, for the first time ever, I went to the capital of the Marshall Islands in Maduro, and it was there in Maduro where I was like, I was clearly the minority of all these Marshalese people, and I was completely unprepared for the changes that that would kind of instill in me as a person, as an academic, as an anthropologist, and I never really looked back from that point on. Right after my Master's I moved to the Marshall Islands, and lived there for about five years, and then spent the next five years kind of going back and forth between Australia and the Marshall Islands while I was doing my PhD. Can you talk a little bit more about how your perception changed about just life in general in the Marshall Islands from the time you were a child? I think it was pretty drastic. Part of it is that I thought, first of all, that my childhood was unique. I had this perception that my straddling of these two worlds, of what I conceived of as these two worlds-- Massachusetts and the Marshall Islands--that kind of contributed to who I was. That that was unique. And that perception was completely wrong. America, of course, but Massachusetts even in particular, has had this really long engagement in the Pacific for over 250 years that really dates back to, you know, the late 18th century, post-revolutionary America, the China trade. There's this long history then between New England and particularly Massachusetts and the Pacific. Right after the Revolutionary War, essentially, the US had succeeded in acquiring political independence from Britain, but now it was faced with needing to establish some kind of economic autonomy. Particularly in New England, you had all these merchants that really needed a way to escape the depression that is very typical after a wartime. They had to find new commercial markets, new trading partners, because of course that had been dissolved between Britain and the US. And so they needed to also find new sea routes in particular, to kind of market some kind of uniquely American product to sustain or establish a national economy, and so post-revolution, you've got all these New Englanders--Massachusetts, Connecticut, New York as well. These ships start going further and further and further, venturing out into the world--the Baltic, the Mediterranean around the Cape of Good Hope, to the Indies, and through the Pacific up to the Northwest coast, and eventually it became clear that one really good way of making money was going up to the Northwest coast, trading with the Native Americans on the Northwest coast, and acquiring sea otter pelts, and bringing those over to China to Canton or Gwangju, where they were super desired, and you could get a lot of money for them. In the process of traveling from the Northwest coast, where they'd already made money now, and going over to China, you kind of trickle through the Pacific Islands. And so there was this discovery period, as well as this development of all these small new markets--sea cucumber, beche-de-mer, sandalwood, opium--that was a big deal for a while. Increasingly, by the start of, I would say the 19th century, so early 1800s, you've got tons of American vessels setting sail for the Pacific, and by some accounts, like my colleague Mary Malloy and some others and basically said that there was more ships from Massachusetts in the Pacific in the early 1800s than any other country in the world, particularly in Europe, of course. Wow, that's so strange. Yeah. So,
Massachusetts was just like completely populating, traveling, traversing the Pacific. Yeah. And making all these deals, right, with Pacific Islanders. And so it was really that moment on--you've got the China trade, then you think about the whaling industry--Nantucket, New Bedford in Massachusetts--it just exploded. You've got Christian missionaries, which came from Massachusetts and Connecticut. Those all came from that region in New England, and so that relationship between the US and the Pacific, that has carried on. And it's somewhat mirrored in my own life, right? So it carried on from that early period to World War II battles over the Pacific, the Trust Territory of the Pacific, the US claiming territorially Guam and American Samoa, the nuclear testing that the United States did in the Marshall Islands, the tuna industry, and today, the ongoing contestations over the sea with other foreign powers. So it's been really interesting to connect my own personal history to these really longstanding histories. And actually, it's it's interesting because those very histories are actually reflected in the Peabody collections. The majority of our collections from Oceania, like at least a third of them, came before the year 1900. And most of them came from precisely those histories, those contacts between New Englanders and the Pacific Islands. So, you've got traders, explorers, the whalers, missionaries, all of those. Missionaries, scientific expeditions to find the next new thing, right? All of those. That is the kind of stuff that's in our collections. So some of it dates back to the 1770s, 1780s. A lot of it is 1850s and up to 1900 when all that stuff really started to expand. I think a lot of people think of museum collections as these white guys going out and just pillaging a place and just taking all their cultural heritage stuff, and let's be real, that did happen in some circumstances, right? Yeah. But in a lot of the Peabody collections here at Harvard, it's collections of five things at first in the early days. It's this whaler from New Bedford that went out, got a few things when he was physically interacting with Pacific Islanders, trading things, and then bringing them back and sometimes sitting in a shed in this guy's farm in New Bedford, or wherever, for 50 to 100 years until that person's grandchildren say, "oh, we got this stuff. Let's give it to Harvard." It's these really intimate little stories that I think are interesting.

Jennifer Berglund  12:38
So what kinds of things would they collect?

Ingrid Ahlgren  12:42
It's certainly various to some degree, but of course, you're going to get stuff that's portable. Most people, these ships are pretty jam packed with people, and whale oil, and blubber, and all sorts of stuff, right? So, sometimes it's things like clubs. There's other weaponry that I think people want it to, because it probably there's something had that has to do with manliness, but also, they're a little bit more portable. And you get fish hooks. A little bit later, you start to see things like tapa cloth, like bark cloth, you see those start to be collected. But oftentimes, they're in these smaller, portable sizes. So all these collections, they have so many stories to tell. And it's not just about, "this is what Tongan tapa looks like." It's about those interactions, and it's
about those stories, and you can kind of get that sense just through this one tapa cloth. That there's not just one story, right? And that there also, it's not just about that historical moment in time, but you can look at those moments in time, and then reflect back on our own contemporary society, thinking about what that imagery means and why Americans were in the Pacific in the first place. And so it really provides an opportunity to reflect back on ourselves. And I think that's some of the most rewarding part of working with collections is those stories.

How did your perception of your role as an anthropologist change after working in the Marshall Islands for an extended time? First of all, you know, it definitely highlighted for me my own sense of privilege, to some degree, and understanding that my voice somehow appears louder and stronger in this world than a lot of the Marshalese voices do. So, even though that they are the ones with their own expertise, they are the ones that are experts in their own culture. I could never be an expert in Marshalese culture, but the fact that I have this platform for Marshalese or other Pacific Islanders, that I'm talking about their culture, was really an awakening moment for me, and continues to be. Like, I continue to reckon on a regular, if not daily basis, with this notion of that privilege and whose voices get heard and Because I'm within academia, and I publish things, and I create exhibits, those things go out into the world in a really strong way. And a lot of times Marshalese voices don't. It's really made me have to take a step back and approach how I do research, and how I do exhibits as well. So there's this great colleague at the University of Hawaii named Noelle Kahanu. She's kind of come up with this great way of phrasing it, of elucidating this idea of what she calls ceding and seeding authority. So seeding as in c-e-d-i-n-g, so, ceding, letting go, right? Giving up authority, your own authority as a traditional curator, and then seeding authority as in s-e-e-d, as in planting the seeds of authority for other people's voices. It's a really evocative way of thinking about it. I think about that, or try to think about it on a regular basis. So how can I take my privileged platform and position to open up the doors for other voices to tell their own stories or different stories than the ones I would tell and what those stories are that matter to Pacific Islanders and oceanic peoples today.

**Jennifer Berglund 16:17**

We're focusing on oceans this month. And so it's very appropriate that we're talking about Oceanic peoples who are typically Island people who are inextricably connected to the ocean. As someone who's worked with islanders for as long as you have and has lived in the islands, how do you think that plays into the worldview of islanders--the ocean? How does it play into the worldview of islanders? And how do you think that worldview is unique to the diversity of cultures within the region?

**Ingrid Ahlgren 16:51**

That's a great question. I would first say that even though I have experience living and being and benefiting from the islands for so many years, you know, I'm not an Islander myself, so it's hard for me to represent their viewpoints about the ocean. But that being said, there are many
incredible knowledge holders, leaders and scholars from across the Oceanic region that have articulated this in some ways. And so, there's a couple things to point out. First of all, from my understanding, one of the important things that I've learned, and is important to understand, is that there doesn't necessarily exist this binary division between land and sea that many Western cultures have kind of cultivated over the years, and divided the world up into, especially on maps. You think of green and blue, and you think of solid lines that are outlining these places, and nation states in particular, right? So much of the West, and not all, but you know, many Western Euroamerican-centric countries and cultures have really clung to this idea of nation states, borders, territories, and territories as in the term terra, which means land. Right? And that's, you know, something, that's language the United Nations uses, and that's something that simply does not resonate for most Pacific Island cultures where their domains look much different. There's far flung locations, underwater sea mounts, there's sea lanes, there's open ocean areas that were regularly accessed, traversed, traded amongst, and understood to be part of a shared or owned domain. There's this really wonderful poet and philosopher from the islands named Epeli Hauʻofa who reframed lot of people's thinking in the 1990s that people continue to cite and listen to as a leader in the Pacific. So, in the 1990s, he was rethinking the way the West head imagined the Pacific as these kind of isolated little nation states and regions of Micronesia, Melanesia, Polynesia. And he declared that the region does not make sense under those groupings of basically islands separated by the sea, but instead, he kind of articulated the region as a vast, watery continent. So it's a continent--the Pacific Ocean is a continent. And it's these places, the islands that are interconnected by the sea. So what he called the sea of islands. You cannot remove the ocean from the Pacific Island cultures and Oceanic cultures, language, practices, cultures, idioms, but it's more that. It's not just about this cultural worldview. I would say that it has really big implications, practically, today, because there continues to be that ongoing idea, of course, of nation states and borders and territories. But there also continues to be this extractive mentality for the world's oceans, and the Pacific in particular. So there's still these debates about the open ocean, about this concept of lawless, unclaimed, international waters where anything can happen and no one's in charge. And these are waters that Pacific Islanders have traversed for millennia. And included, and continue to consider part of their own domain and have for millennia, and yet it remains this area for ongoing contestations between world powers, not necessarily Pacific Islanders. And so, we really have to rethink how, even institutions like the United Nations, as categorized oceans, and categorized water, as separate from land as opposed to incorporating it in a more holistic way. How have you personally grown to appreciate the ocean because of your work with Pacific Islanders? Honestly, I fear and respect to the ocean more than I ever did before. It's kind of this beautiful but terrifying entity with a great capacity and kind of a scary power to both house, provide, sustain life, but also take it away. I feel constantly compelled and drawn to the ocean, and I continue to appreciate its unrivaled beauty. But I definitely do not see it as a playground like I think I saw it as a child. Now, that being said, what I do think I've come to appreciate and continue to be in great awe of
is not only the ocean, of course, but the humans that have made the ocean their home, and really strive to hold on to their homelands, and their waters against these immense pressures of resource depletion, pollution, global contestation, climate change. And I really think that not everyone fully appreciates the impact that these pressures have on the livelihoods of Pacific peoples, and the grit and resourcefulness that it's taken for many of these societies to carry on. And so, I think I take that more than anything with me both personally and professionally.

**Jennifer Berglund** 22:17
Ingrid Ahlgren, thank you so much for being here. This has been really wonderful.

**Ingrid Ahlgren** 22:21
Thank you. It's been really fun, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to talk about a place that I really care about. So thank you.

**Jennifer Berglund** 22:37
Today's HMSC Connects! Podcast was produced by me, Jennifer Berglund, and the Harvard Museums of Science and Culture. Special thanks to Ingrid Ahlgren for her wisdom and expertise. And thank you so much for listening. If you liked today's podcast, please subscribe on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Podbean, or wherever you get your podcasts. See you next week!