

Nature Note

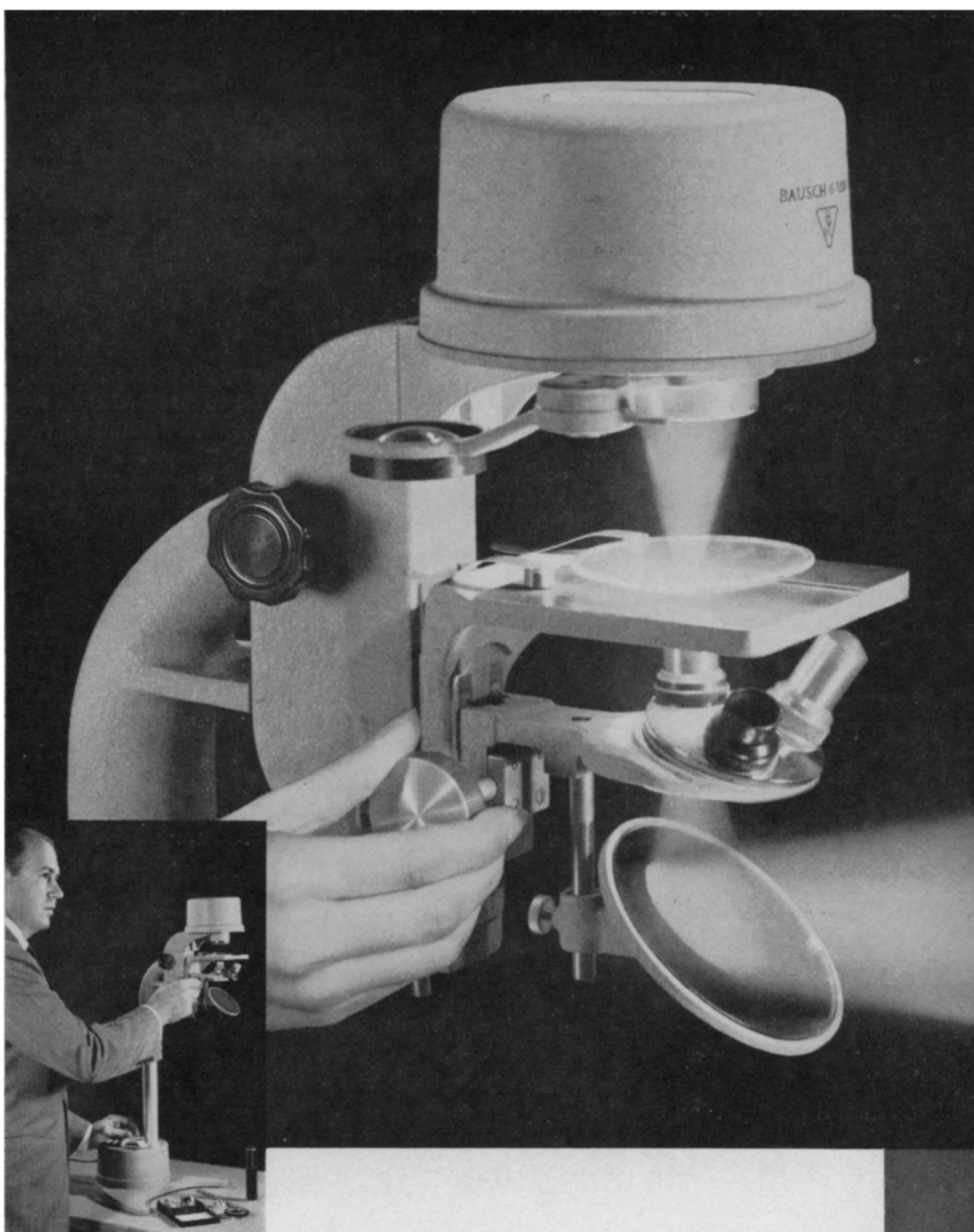
Sabellariid Worm

A tiny sea worm, no longer than three inches, helps protect the beaches of Florida. The tubular worm, Sabellaria, thrives in pounding surf and builds honeycomb palaces extending for many miles along the coast. The extensive reefs, sometimes six feet high and several hundred yards wide, shield the beaches; giant ocean waves smash upon the sabellariid reefs and expend their energy. Behind the reefs, in quieter waters, fragments of shells, and other material build up and eventually become solidified into beach rock.

In the spray and turmoil of the surf, millions of tiny sabellariids reach out their two front feet to snatch grains of sand from the water, which they then coat with a cement from their body, and jam into place with a hammer blow of their head. Thus each creature adds to his individual tube house, and thus the reefs are built seaward, explains David W. Kirtley, doctoral student at Florida State University. The brown, rock-like housing material of the worms is found attached to seawalls, jetties and piers (left) and other objects. It sometimes is washed ashore in chunks, looking like brown cheesecake, riddled with holes. Actually the hard material is a honeycomb of individual tubes, each housing one sabellariid. At low tide, the worms draw in their heads, and stop up their tube entrances with two front feet. The worms also snatch their food from the pounding sea—usually plankton, microscopic marine plants and animals.

The extensive reefs reaching into the Atlantic Ocean from Cape Canaveral to Biscayne Bay were responsible for shipwrecks of many Spanish galleons, trading schooners and fishing boats during stormy weather. For centuries sailors assumed these disastrous reefs were made of dead coral. They are neither dead nor coral, says Kirtley. They are still being built by living sabellariids.

Sabellariids are members of the segmented worm family called Annelida, of the class Polychaete which are common marine animals often overlooked by casual observers because they are so secretive. Some of the Polychaetes are free-moving and crawl about beneath rocks or shells, or burrow in the sand and mud. Other Polychaetes are sedentary tube-dwellers. The tube is attached to a rock or solid object. Usually only the head of the worm ever emerges from the opening.



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