

From Pests to Displays

Lively (and deadly) metabolisms at sea



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Rat eating cereal (Staatliches Museum für Naturkunde Karlsruhe. Image: H. Zell/Wikimedia. [CC BY SA](#))

What were the challenges naturalists in the mid-19th century encountered when transporting specimens and live animals by ship across the Atlantic? The story of the botanist Richard Schomburgk, who traveled with his collected plants and animals from British Guiana to Germany in 1844, offers some intriguing insights. Specifically, it sheds light on practices of care and disposal that emerged in the long-distance shipping of animals. Because during the passage, the use and value of animals and plants continuously changed depending on ever shifting [metabolic relations](#). These transformations evidence some of the paths – and [detours](#) – through which animals entered zoos and museums at the time.¹

Richard Schomburgk, who later became director of the Botanical Garden in Adelaide, was a gardening assistant at the Royal Gardens of Sanssouci, Frederick the Great's palace in Potsdam at the time. From 1840 to 1844, he accompanied his brother Robert Hermann Schomburgk on a journey to the British colony of Guiana. Robert travelled on behalf of the English crown on a mission to survey the eastern and western borders of the British Guiana, part of the mainland British West Indies on the northern coast of South America,

today's Guyana.² After three years of work, he had established the border with Venezuela, now known as the Schomburgk Line, as well as with Dutch Guiana, today's Suriname. Richard in turn received a government grant through the intercession of Alexander von Humboldt. The Prussian government commissioned him to collect new flora, fauna, minerals and ethnographic specimens for the Berlin Zoological Museum and the Botanic Gardens.³ But when, in March 1843, he learned that a zoological garden was to open in Berlin, he immediately began acquiring living animals as well.⁴

Martin Hinrich Lichtenstein, the director of both the Zoological Museum and the future Zoological Garden, remained skeptical:

“Despite having enough funds at my disposal I would advise you against animal acquisitions that require arduous transportation and whose survival depends on innumerable vagaries that cannot be anticipated prior to embarkment and when contracting with the ship's captain.”⁵

Indeed, the [transportation](#) of living animals (and plants) over long distances exposes them to various risks and dangers. This was especially true for transits in the 19th century. Back then little was known about the proper housing and treatment of live animals during long crossings, and Schomburgk was not an expert in this field. The Cultural Ministry seemed to share Lichtenstein's concerns and did not grant Schomburgk additional funds for acquiring living animals. Lichtenstein thus advised him to bring only “whatever small mammals, birds, amphibians [...] could be had at cheap prices”.⁶

Schomburgk assembled a “small menagerie” including parrots, curassows, a harpy eagle as well as snakes and different species of apes regardless. Like Alexander von Humboldt before him, he too tried to bring electric eels to Europe. However, he was not allowed to board the passenger liner with his menagerie and instead had to embark on a merchant vessel. In the course of the ship's two-months passage, many of Lichtenstein's fears became reality. First, Schomburgk really struggled with his collection of preserved fish, amphibia and insects. Even dead animals caused troubles in transit across the seas. The [logistics of natural history](#) had already frustrated generations of naturalists: the organic material was susceptible to infestation by other animals, risked to rot due to environmental factors like weather, swell or “pests” like insects, rats, or mice on board and depended on a precarious constellation of appropriate space, facilities and care.⁷ In Schomburgk's case, his collection was almost entirely destroyed by rot as a result of bad alcohol. This left him “with bitter feelings”.⁸

His living animals were no better off. To Schomburgk's great disappointment the electric eels did not survive the crossing, even though he had provided them with earthworms and fresh water during the entire trip. The last two ones died while in the Channel off the coast of England. The difficulties of transportation were already well known in the 16th and 17th century. Anna Toledano and Paula Findlen have detailed the challenges faced by Sir Hans Sloane whose famous collection originates from the fifteen months he had spent in Jamaica in 1687-89.⁹ He would recall with great bitterness his failure to successfully transport any specimens besides dried plants home to London. The living

animals died en route, “and so it happens to most people who lose their strange live animals for want of proper air, food or shelter”.¹⁰

Sloane’s concern for the well-being of his living freight stands in horrendous contrast to the murderous and calculative cruelty of the transatlantic slave trade, which was in full force during his time. (And Schomburgk, too, would have witnessed its ongoing ruinations beyond the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833.) In reading the naturalists’ expressions of (care and worry) for animals and plants in transit, it becomes impossible to not acknowledge the millions of enslaved people who were transported, tortured and, in many cases, murdered on board of ships at the time.¹¹ While a detailed discussion of the conjuncture of chattel slavery and natural history in regard to a logistics of bare life exceeds the scope of this text, it is nevertheless vital to recognise that these are related: Anti-Black racism functioned as a precondition for both economic and scientific pursuits, making certain lands and bodies accessible, exploitable, expendable and killable. What would become formalised in the racial theories of the mid 19th century was then already in place in form of ‘natural’ classifications that only deemed some people fully ‘human’.¹² Thus, in evaluating Schomburgk’s struggle in keeping animals and plants alive, we might also consider how his choices in the field with regards to their value, function and status were structured by (classificatory regimes) of the time.

The continuous metamorphoses of living animals and plants on board were primarily determined by their metabolic relations, that is, by their role in the complex ecologies of (eating and being eaten). For Schomburgk, the struggle of keeping animals and plants alive also meant that choices had to be made throughout the passage about their value, function and status. Given the confined space of the ship, again animals and humans had to compete for (limited resources). The living palms that Schomburgk stored in his own cabin, for instance, suffered badly from being eaten by (mice and rats).¹³ Schomburgk, however, made a virtue out of necessity and added these “pests” to his “little menagerie” destined for the Berlin Zoo while feeding his dead “menagerie pieces” to the invasive rodents. Other animals went directly from being potential zoo animals to natural history collection items. The last days of the journey, from Georgetown to London, were marked by daily (deaths) amongst his “menagerie pieces”.¹⁴ Some of them were (transferred) to zoological collections in Berlin. This was true for Schomburgk’s electric eels: one of them was sent to the Zoological Museum (today’s Museum für Naturkunde Berlin) after its death, where it can still be found in the fish with inventory number 4062. A second specimen (ZMB 4061), which at first also made its way into the museum, was later given to the Zoological Institute in 1892, where it became (an object of teaching) for zoology students at the Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität zu Berlin.

In the end, only very few of the living animals survived the journey. We know of nine animals, including several Hokko and Jaku chickens and a specimen of the famous harpy; a giant snake and a green, 2-foot-long crested lizard from Guyana. These were housed in the Zoological garden. But most did not survive the zoo for long and soon entered the Zoological Museum in Berlin, like the (iguana iguana).

Tracing back their history to the mid-19th century can thus give us insights into how animals were (collected) and became part of a collection at the time, including

those animals that were not originally intended for a collection. In the face of all the logistical restraints that Schomburgk and other naturalists faced, “pests” can become zoo animals and potential natural history specimens may be turned into feed. The – often improvised – logistical practices of natural history at sea can also be understood as transformative metabolic relations that shape and reshape the classification, value and treatment of animals at sea.

Footnotes

1. See “Logistical Natures: Trade, Traffics, and Transformations in Natural History Collecting”, Filippo Bertoni, Mareike Vennen, Ina Heumann, and Tahani Nadim (eds.), forthcoming [↗](#)
2. His experiences in transporting living and dead specimens are recorded in his now archived correspondence with the Natural History Museum in Berlin as well as in a three-volume travelogue. See Richard Schomburgk. *Reisen in Britisch-Guiana in den Jahren 1840-1844*. Leipzig: J.J. Weber, 1847-48. [↗](#)
3. During this Prussian-British expedition, Richard Schomburgk was commissioned to collect for the Berlin Botanic Gardens and the Royal Museums: “His Majesty the King has, at the direct request of the garden assistant in Sanssouci, Richard Schomburgk, by means of the Most High Order issued to the Minister of Finance and to me on 10 October 1840, granted Schomburgk 600 rt Reichstaler annually for two years as assistance for the journey he has undertaken to the Guiana coast and also 600 rt as travel compensation costs once and for all, in order to collect and send plants, seeds and other suitable objects on his journey, especially for the local botanical garden and also for the institutes of natural history here.” In the first year he received 1,200 Reichstaler, in the second year another 600 Reichstaler; see MFN, HBSB, Zool. Mus. S I, Schomburgk, Ri, Bl. 44. [↗](#)
4. He acquired the animals through purchase as well as barter, see Schomburgk, 1847-48, vol. II: 510. [↗](#)
5. M.H. Lichtenstein to the Ministry for Religious, Educational and Medical Affairs, 20.06.1843, MFN, HBSB, Zool. Mus. S I, Schomburgk, Ri, Bl. 44. [↗](#)
6. *Ibid.* [↗](#)
7. See for example Anne Mariss. “... for fear they might decay’. Die materielle Prekarität von Naturalien und ihre Inszenierung in naturhistorischen Zeichnungen”. In *Objekte als Quellen der historischen Kulturwissenschaften*, Annette Cremer und Martin Mulsow (eds.). Köln u.a.: Böhlau 2016: 137-148. <https://doi.org/10.7788/9783412510022.137>. [↗](#)
8. Schomburgk, 1847-48, vol. II: 549. [↗](#)
9. See Paula Findlen and Anna Toldano. “The Materials of Natural History”. In *Worlds of Natural History*. Helen Anne Curry et al. (eds.). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018: 151-169. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108225229.010>. See also James Delbourgo. *Collecting the World: Hans Sloane and the Origins of the British Museum*. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press 2017. [↗](#)
10. See Hans Sloane. *A Voyage to the Islands Madera, Barbados, Nieves, S. Christophers and Jamaica*, 2 vols. London: printed by B. M. for the author 1707-25, vol. II: 346. See also Christopher M. Parsons and Kethleen S. Murphy, “Ecosystems under Sail: Specimen Transport in the Eighteenth-Century French and British Atlantics”. *Early American Studies* (Fall 2012): 503-539. M. Hunter, A. Walker, and A. MacGregor (eds.). *From Books to Bezoars: Sir Hans Sloane and his Collections*. London: British Library, 2012. [↗](#)
11. To learn more about the history of the Atlantic (triangular) slave trade, see e.g. Christina Sharpe. “The Ship: The Trans*Atlantic”. In *In The Wake: On Blackness and Being*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016: 25-67. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373452.002>; Saidiya Hartman. *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2007; Jane Webster. “The Zong in the Context of the Eighteenth-Century Slave Trade”. *The Journal of Legal History* 28, no. 3 (2007): 285-298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01440360701698403>; Jeremy Krikler. “A Chain of Murder in the Slave Trade: A Wider Context of the Zong Massacre”. *International Review of Social History* 57, no. 3 (2012), 393-415. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020859012000491>. [↗](#)
12. See e.g. Sylvia Wynter: *On Being Human as Praxis*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2015. [↗](#)
13. Having only enough funds to acquire two Wardian Cases for housing the valuable orchid collection, he stowed the palms first in a longboat and, after their conditions worsened, in his own cabin. But not even such generous co-habitation could save them from the heavy damage inflicted by mice and rats. Schomburgk, 1847-48, vol. II: 510. [↗](#)
14. Schomburgk travelled on a merchant vessel from Georgetown to London, where the animals were loaded on a steamer heading to Hamburg from where they continued on to Berlin. We don’t know the details of how the 21 boxes of living plants and 11 boxes with living animals were stored and kept on board. [↗](#)