Culion Crab Attack

The setting of this story is Culion Leper Colony, Culion Island, Calamian Group, Palawan Philippines, in May, 1966. I and some other Peace Corps Volunteers had come to Culion to carry out various summer projects: camp activities for children of lepers, assisting in the leper colony nursery, building houses for leper patients using local native materials.

It was evening, dinner had finished, so I and other PCV's [male and female] were discussing the day's activities and events around the dining table, located on the 2nd floor of the leper colony Administration Building. The upstairs area of this building was being used for communal eating and PCV [female] living quarters. The Administration Building was situated near the main harbour, Balala, Culion Island where the doctors and administrators, etc. lived. Electricity was produced for the leper colony by generator and operated only for a very limited number of night time hours. The very, very antique telephone fixed on the main room wall suddenly rang, with the voice on the line saying, "…electricity going off." This call was routine every night.

The exact moment the lights would 'die' was anytime from 1 – 5 minutes or so from the phone call.

This particular night the lights went out very quick, and caught everyone unprepared.

The exact instant the lights died, enveloping everyone in blackness – an ear-piercing, female scream – rang out, startling all. Further screams and voices screeching – both male and female - echoed in the room. "Help…I've been bitten….. something 'big' just walked across my foot….Ayyyyy - I've just stepped on something…..!" Chairs fell or were knocked over …papers, cards books falling on the floor…..people climbing on the dinner table in mad panic … someone was trying to light a match… someone was trying to find a candle….absolute chaos…..

Finally, a candle was found and lit ….revealing the mayhem and its cause - much to the astonishment …and laughter of all.

A large number of very big, very alive mangrove crabs [Genus/species: *Scylla serrata*; Common name: giant mangrove crab]… with finger crushing claws, open and very menacing, were crawling around the floor and even in the bedrooms!

The next half hour or so was spent by all in hysterical laughter…trying… by candlelight … to …..find…. catch…. or lure these very large, unhappy mangrove crabs with claws waving… into 2 baskets – without losing a hand, finger, foot or toe!

Unknown to us, the crabs had been purchased from a Culion fisherman earlier in the day by the cook, were contained in 2 large woven baskets with lids in the small kitchen just off the main room – to be cooked the next day. The crabs had other ideas ….had forced the lids off the baskets….. making their escape….in the darkness ….

This was just one of the many delightful, funny, memorable - 'expect the unexpected'- cultural experiences I had as a Peace Corps Volunteer while working on summer projects [1966 -67] at Culion Leper Colony. All due to the island's unusual layers of history, delightful children, truly inspirational leper patients, and doctors including the internationally known Dr H.W. Wade, the wonderful nursing Sisters of Saint Paul de Chartres and Jesuit priests - all surrounded by incredible beautiful, diverse and ecologically important marine fauna and geology.

Little did I know at that moment in time, in this face to face encounter with mangrove crabs inside a darkened room on the 2nd floor of a building at Culion, Leper Colony, Palawan, Philippines that I would end up spending the major part of my working life curating and researching crab taxonomy [and other crustaceans] of the Indo-Pacific. All later contacts with the crab *Scylla serrata* bringing forth a quiet chuckle and wonder memories of Culion.