

Tamara Fernando

Historicizing Marine Science in Ceylon 1850-1925

This paper traces the emergence of marine biology and oceanography as nascent disciplinary formations in the context of colonial Ceylon. It uses research and scientific reports published on the pearl-bearing oyster to reflect on the links between industry, science, and empire in the late nineteenth-century, focusing on the incentives for knowledge-production around the sea and its creatures, especially on the northwestern littoral of the island. I argue that the oyster in the nineteenth century was transformed from a resource at sea to an individuated creature, but then relegated to the environment once more by the 1920s. This narrative explores themes of colonial finance, infrastructure, scientific expertise, scientific specimens, local labourers and intermediaries and the role of technology.